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**MAKING MODERNISM'S MONSTERS: ATAVISTIC  
BODIES AND THE POLITICS OF DECLINING LIFE**

**A dissertation presented by**

**BYRON HEFFER**

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**Supervised by**

**Sara Crangle**

**Peter Boxall**

**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

**SCHOOL OF ENGLISH**

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“I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitting in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree”

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis enquires into the significance of monstrosity in literary modernism. It argues that an analysis of monstrosity in the work of Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957), Mina Loy (1882-1966) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) provides new ways of situating the modernist body in relation to contemporary preoccupations with biopolitics, animality, media technologies and the posthuman. The aim of this thesis is to show that theories of posthumanism which emerged from postmodern or poststructuralist thought cannot provide a persuasive account of the modernist fascination with the monstrous. On one hand, the writers I analyse prefigured the canonical strains of posthumanist thought by imagining bodies which disrupt the categorical divisions between humans and animals, organisms and machines, the living and the nonliving. On the other hand, they repeatedly evoke the monstrous by drawing on narratives of atavistic regression and tropes of contamination, horror, degeneration and pathology. Literary and artistic modernism coincided with a period in which anxieties about the ‘species body’ (Foucault) of humanity were intensely debated among scientists, eugenicists, politicians, artists, writers and cultural critics. By positioning avant-garde and modernist writers and artists in the context of biopolitical modernity, this thesis argues that critics have often neglected the contested and politically ambiguous origins of modernist posthumanism. In seeking to understand the connection between historical forces and cultural production, ‘Making Modernism’s Monsters’ contributes to current debates about the emergent cultures of literary posthumanism, the cultural logic of modern biopolitics and representations of the body in modernist-era art and literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is one affect that adheres to the body of the monster more than any other: *horror*. The horrific, according to Noël Carroll, begins with an affectively charged reaction to the monster. There are two conditions that must be in place for the monster to horrify: the monster must fascinate because it is ‘repulsive’;<sup>1</sup> and the monster must be an ‘impure’ mixture of bodies, ‘categorically contradictory’.<sup>2</sup> While monsters often lack vital body parts, it is the incompleteness of humanity’s conceptual categories and discourses that is at the root of the horrific. Horror strips bare the conceptual clothing of the Real to expose the rawness and ‘barbarism’ of inhuman life. It shows us that the Real is too much for our humanising discourses and concepts to bear. This unbearable surplus is nowhere more evident than in horror genre’s mixing of the human with different orders of being: ‘Just as Deleuze-Spinoza say that we do not yet know what a body can do, so in horror we are shown the many ways a human body can be mutated into non-human forms’.<sup>3</sup> The loss of human distinction, in other words, lies at the heart of the horrific, because ‘[w]hat horror (or the horrific) does is play with images in order to show continuities and discontinuities between human and nonhuman images’.<sup>4</sup> In addition, being horrified often involves exposure to excessive violence. Adriana Cavarero, in her excellent study, *Horrorism* (2009), thus claims that horror springs from the ‘instinctive disgust for a violence that, not merely content to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability’.<sup>5</sup> Horrific violence for Cavarero erases the divide between the human and the nonhuman, burying the individual person within the unmarked grave of impersonal materiality. ‘Horror’, as Marcel O’Gorman has pointed out with reference to Cavarero, ‘exceeds death; it represents not only the cessation of life but a challenge to the human form itself’.<sup>6</sup> The horrific entails, then, the transformation of a form of life beyond recognition. As John Mullarkey puts it, horror ‘shows us the human and non-human, the living and inert, spliced together’.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, monstrosity and horror emerge above all as questions concerning the limits of the visible. Many scholars have noted that the word ‘monster’ shares its etymological ancestry with the English word ‘demonstrate’, both of which have their root in the Latin *monstrare*, meaning ‘to put on display’. Despite this etymological root, though, it is important to note that the monstrous involves disappearance as often as it involves something coming into

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<sup>1</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, the Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> John Mullarkey, ‘The Tragedy of the Object’, *Angelaki*, 17.4 (2012), 39-59 (p. 20).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. by William McCraig (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Marcel O’Gorman, *Necromedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> John Mullarkey, ‘Animal Spirits: Philosomorphism and the Background Revolts of Cinema’, *Angelaki*, 18.1 (2013), 11-29 (p. 20).

the light. Or it might be more exact to say that hiddenness is one of the conditions of possibility for the appearance of the monster. This explains why narratives of the monstrous often unfold in a dialectical movement between visibility and invisibility: Peter Schmiel's lost shadow in Chamisso's tale, the role of optics and blindness in E.T.A Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, the hidden portrait in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, and even poor Gregor Samsa's confinement beyond the parental gaze. If the monstrous is an event that ruptures the ordinary relations between the seen and the unseen, then perhaps what the monster shows us above all is the limits of our perception. The genesis of the monster involves the misshaping and intermingling of existing forms and bodies.

The identification of radical novelty with the misshaping of established forms is a signature of the modernist moment. Modernism not only incorporates the monstrous but transmutes it through radical experiments with literary and aesthetic form. In a recent article which explores the insurrectionary power of the monstrous in the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, Susan Harrow writes: 'Monstrosity is an integral part of the transformative project of modernism, across time and media, expanding the boundaries of what it is to know and to feel, and deepening our understanding of what it is to be human'.<sup>8</sup> She continues: 'Often monstrosity and aesthetic innovation have reciprocal agency: the modernist writer invokes monstrosity, and monstrosity (and related forms of horror) make possible the figurative pursuit of the non-normative (or anti-normative) positions and protean values that define the modernist project'.<sup>9</sup> While I agree with these eloquent remarks, I want to enlarge our understanding of the 'reciprocal agency' of modernism and monstrosity by situating this relationship within the contexts of biopolitics and posthumanism. If something akin to a *literature of despeciation* (in which the human body mixes with other animals and objects or loses its 'human' characteristics) can be gleaned from the archives of modernism, then I want to negotiate the stakes of these endgames of the human. We might want to think, in this regard, about Samuel Beckett's memorable phrase 'loss of species', which appears in both *Watt* (1953)<sup>10</sup> and *How It Is* (1964).<sup>11</sup> We could also consider the 'anthropoid apes' referred to in the 'Circe' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922),<sup>12</sup> Satters' 'proto-historic jowl' in Lewis's *The Childermass* (1928),<sup>13</sup> or the 'the little whining beast / Whose longing / Is to slink back to antediluvian burrow' in Mina Loy's poem 'Human Cylinders' (1917).<sup>14</sup> What these modernist examples of despeciation share in common is a satirical perversion of evolutionary jargon, as if by garbling the Enlightenment discourse of science — turning the language of knowledge and progress against

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Harrow, 'Modernist Monstrosity in Rimbaud's Verse and Prose Poetry', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 55.2 (2018), 138-153 (p. 138).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1953), p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 637

<sup>13</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *The Human Age. Book One: Childermass* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 56

<sup>14</sup> Mina Loy, 'Human Cylinders', in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 40-41 (p. 41).



itself — they can gain some traction on the peculiar emptying out of the category of the human in the early twentieth century. In certain respects, modernists pioneered the concerns that continue to dominate contemporary reflections on the definition of human. If the human animal is growing ‘curiouser and curiouser’, what words or forms of representation can we find to help us understand this process? How can we begin to unravel the paradox that rising levels of ‘species anxiety’ invariably lead to the perpetuation of our all-too-human fantasies of scientific mastery and biotechnological enhancement?<sup>15</sup> Is it possible to move to a position *beyond* or a time *after* humanism in a culture saturated in its exhausted vocabularies? In any case, today there is certainly no shortage of words intended to illuminate the supposed twilight of this most cherished idol. Witness the proliferation of words that negate, invert, or at the very least, contest ‘humanism’: not only the now-familiar terms antihumanism and posthumanism, but also less well-known coinages such as ‘ahumanism’ and ‘inhumanism’.<sup>16</sup> Whether any of these particular labels will prove definitive is unknown, though their proliferation suggests we inhabit a time when humanism is over — yet it goes on. And is there any term for that? Here I am alluding to the strange temporality described by the eponymous character of Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*: ‘My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?’<sup>17</sup> Molloy’s remarks seem to me an apt description of the posthumous life of the humanist tradition in European modernism. In this introduction, I examine two related contexts for my study of monstrosity in the work of Lewis, Loy, and Beckett. First, I examine the biopolitical context that gave rise degeneration theory and the cultural fascination with monstrous hybrids of human and animal. Second, I reflect on the relations between posthumanism and the modernist body.

### Atavism and Biopolitics

Let me cite one of Michel Foucault’s most celebrated definitions of biopolitics: ‘what might be called a society’s “threshold of modernity” is reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies’.<sup>18</sup> As Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze have spelled out: ‘Biopolitics, in this phrasing, involves a sort of “game” in which nothing less than the species

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<sup>15</sup> David Wheatley, “‘Quite Exceptionally Anthropoid’: Species Anxiety and Metamorphosis in Beckett’s *Humans and Other Animals*”, in *Beckett and Animals*, ed. by Mary Bryden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 59-70 (p. 59).

<sup>16</sup> I take the term “ahumanism” from Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 2. For a recent discussion of inhumanism, see Julian Murphet, ‘A Modest Proposal for the Inhuman’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.3 (2016), 651-670. As Murphet notes, the term “inhumanism” originates in the work of the poet Robinson Jeffers, p. 652. For a more detailed discussion of terms derived from “humanism” see Sean Pryor, ‘Inhuman Words: Philology, Modernism, Poetry’, *Modernism/modernity*, 23.3 (Sept 2006), 555-571 (p. 556).

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* ed. by Shane Weller (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 143.

itself, the species as a living entity, is “at play” or “at stake” [*enjeu*].<sup>19</sup> According to Foucault, there was a shift from the classical politics of sovereignty to a biopolitics of populations at some point in the eighteenth century; this entailed, in turn, the entrance of life itself ‘into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention’.<sup>20</sup> Once the life of the human species has moved ‘into the realm of explicit calculations’ politics becomes an activity with biological stakes: namely, securing and maximising the health of populations.<sup>21</sup> At ‘the “threshold of modernity,”’ the life of the species enters into the trajectory of history, and the human animal becomes a species whose existence is at stake in political decisions. However, the fact that from the mid-nineteenth century on the defence of the life of the species took the form of biological racism, eugenics, and genocide suggests that the politics of life is apt to reverse into a politics of death. Roberto Esposito connects this reversal to the aporia he calls ‘the enigma of biopolitics’.<sup>22</sup> He explains that biopolitics refers to political dominion over life on the one hand and the political force inherent in life on the other. ‘In the first case, biopolitics would be an absolute power over life; in the second, an absolute power of life’.<sup>23</sup> Does biopolitics harm life or does it serve life? Esposito’s answer to this question is to interpret biopolitics according to ‘the category of immunization’, which ‘runs between the two principle declinations of the biopolitical paradigm: one affirmative and productive, the other negative and lethal’.<sup>24</sup> Esposito demonstrates that even the most deadly acts of biopolitical violence have the aim of protecting life in order to maximise its flourishing. In Nazi biopolitics, for example, the Aryan body seeks to protect itself against contamination through a programme of extermination:

What they want to kill in the Jew and in all human types like them isn’t life, but the presence in life of death: a life that is already dead because it is marked hereditarily by an original and irremediable deformation; the contagion of the German people by a part of life inhabited and oppressed by death.<sup>25</sup>

Esposito’s ventriloquizing of the rhetoric of Nazism demonstrates that deformation and the living dead — both standard criteria of the monstrous — reside at the core of Nazi biopolitics.

Without denying the generative force of the monstrous, I want to ask what it means for our understanding of modernism’s monstrosities that they emerged against the historical backdrop of eugenicism and degeneration theory. To appreciate this history it is necessary to return to the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso devised a ground-breaking method of anthropometrical analysis for determining the

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze. ‘Introduction. Biopolitics: An Encounter’, *Biopolitics: A Reader*, ed. by Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 1-40, (p. 11).

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, p. 142.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

physical characteristics of criminal deviants. Compiling the visual and metrical data he collected from the bodies of criminals, he produced taxonomies of ‘defective’ types. ‘With the aid of statistics and photography,’ Daniel Pick explains, ‘Lombroso sought to “freeze” the process of evolution: to isolate in taxonomies and still-shots the features of a criminal subspecies’.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, Lombroso’s photographic catalogues of defective bodies typify the taxonomic drive to impose order on a disorderly reality, subsuming the multiplicity of unusual bodies under the sign of general characteristics: shining the lamp of Enlightenment into heretofore murky regions of nature. On the other hand, this taxonomic drive excludes the very bodies that it brings to light, debarring them from normalcy, health, and sexual reproduction, as if they literally embodied irrational forces hostile to the continuance of civilization. The key claim of Lombroso’s influential research was that the criminal type is ‘an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals’.<sup>27</sup> According to Roberto Esposito, Lombrosian atavism ‘is configured as a kind of biohistorical anachronism that reverses the line of human evolution until it has brought it back into contact with that of the animal’.<sup>28</sup> Lombroso’s work was part of the larger apparatus of biological monitoring that expanded significantly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These decades witnessed the legitimisation of eugenic science by figures such as Francis Galton (1822-1911), the innovations in biometric police profiling devised by Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), and the programmes of sterilisation and racial extermination in Nazi Germany. This period of biopolitical consolidation historically overlaps with the period of literary modernism. Unsurprisingly, this ensemble of forces had a significant impact on the representation of non-normative bodies in modernist poetry and prose. Joseph Valente explains that ‘[t]he image of disability in modernist literature is a highly mediated effect of the development of the regime of biopower over the course of the nineteenth century’.<sup>29</sup> The interaction between eugenics and modernism is not, however, restricted to the representation of nonstandard bodies. Many modernists actively campaigned on behalf of selective breeding. As Donald Childs has shown, some of the most influential and accomplished writers of the modernist period were convinced of the political efficacy and scientific validity of eugenic theory.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the crude biological determinism of Lombroso’s theory, atavism is in fact manifold and ambiguous in its implications. The insightful work of Dana Seitler charts out the

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Pick, ‘The Faces of Anarchy: Lombroso and the Politics of Criminal Science in Post-Unification Italy’, *History Workshop Journal*, 21 (Spring 1986), 60-86 (p. 62).

<sup>27</sup> Cesare Lombroso qtd in Dana Seitler, *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 55.

<sup>28</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Valente, ‘Modernism and Cognitive Disability: A Genealogy’, in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chichester: Wiley, 2013), 379-398 (p. 380).

<sup>30</sup> Donald J Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture and Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

multivalent temporalities of regression and return made possible by the theory of atavism. In her study *Atavistic Tendencies* (2008), Seitler argues that the idea of atavism ‘disallows the modern construction of time as a unity that can be distinguished from a stable, archaic past’.<sup>31</sup> She explains that atavistic regression ‘offers up a notion of time as multidirectional and of the body as polytemporal’.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, atavism denotes the persistence of traces of the animal within the human. On the other hand, it suggests a multispecies form of monstrosity that is incompatible with the autonomous human subject.<sup>33</sup> While the backwards turn of atavism in one sense allows a self-satisfied humanity to face itself in the mirror, Seitler turns her back on the specular image of the human to embrace ‘the eternal recurrence of the animal’.<sup>34</sup> Lombroso’s theory identifies the existence of evolutionary throwbacks which obstruct the linear march of progress. But it also contests this idea of time moving in a straight line from past to present, primitive to civilized, animal to human. Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) extends Lombroso’s ideas about the ‘atavistic’ body of the degenerate individual into the sphere of culture. Nordau’s diagnostic gaze seizes on a raft of aesthetic innovations that he considers symptomatic of biological abnormality. Claiming to decode these fin de siècle works as if their stylistic features were akin to the so-called ‘stigmata’ of the degenerate body, he interprets them as evidence of evolutionary regression. Nordau’s conjoining of degeneration and aesthetics casts a long shadow: ‘It is impossible not to see that thread’, Esposito tells us, ‘that ties similar evaluations with future Nazi lucubrations with regard to degenerate art’.<sup>35</sup>

Nazi biopolitics essentially put into practice the existing concepts of degeneration theory, in which the ‘abnormal’ type threatens the collective health of the race.<sup>36</sup> For the Nazis, immunizing the national body meant safeguarding and enhancing Aryan life. Pathological anti-life was to be isolated, and then eradicated. When immunized through violence, the German body would assume its sacred and immortal form. Nazism’s homicidal fantasy of a split between pure Aryan life and the living death embodied by the degenerate is visible in the distance between the aesthetics of the monstrous in their anti-Semitic propaganda and their championing of classical aesthetic form in representations of the German body. While the flesh of Jewish degenerate is animalized, formless, and stripped of life, the German body is spiritualized, well-defined, overflowing with vital power.<sup>37</sup> It is noteworthy that art and aesthetics turn up at significant moments in Esposito’s reflections of biopolitics. This study follows Esposito lead in taking aesthetic monstrosity and degeneration to be mutually constitutive categories. For example, Esposito argues that Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) not

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<sup>31</sup> Seitler, *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 57.

only cites the work of Nordau and Lombroso; it prefigures the Nazi fantasy of hunting and annihilating the contaminated life of the undead monster. For Esposito, Dracula ‘encapsulates the characteristics of the degenerate — he is no longer the other in man, but the other from man [*del l'uomo*]. Both wolf, bat, and bloodsucker, he is above all the *principle of contamination*’.<sup>38</sup> While *Dracula* engages with the Lombrosian motif of the animalized human, its singular importance as a cultural precursor to the Nazi politics of death lies in its portrayal of the vampire’s interspecies mutations *together with* his undeadness:

Just like the degenerate, he is not a true man, but has human features. He doesn’t have an image, but continually changes appearance. He is not a type but a countertype. He belongs to the world of the “non” — no longer alive, he is still and above all else “undead,” repulse by life into an abyss that cannot be bridged. He is an already dead, a half dead, a living dead, just as some vampires some fifty years later will be designated with their yellow star on their arms’.<sup>39</sup>

For Esposito, eugenics was intent on ‘translating these kinds of literary hallucination into reality’.<sup>40</sup>

Atavism, degeneration, deformity. Far from disappearing at the close of the fin-de-siècle these tropes persist in modernist writing, albeit in new forms. Of course the connection between monstrous births and futurity existed long before degeneration theory and eugenics emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century—for millennia monstrous births have been interpreted as omens ‘that presage future events’.<sup>41</sup> But in the age of biopolitics, the future is less a matter of divine providence than the rationale for the exercise of State biopower. ‘Biofuturity’ provides the temporal horizon for projects of state planning and social engineering based on statistical analysis, medical theories about population control, and eugenic practices such as forced sterilization.<sup>42</sup> One of the essential differences between the traditional monster and the modernist monster is the latter’s imbrication in this network of institutions and public discourses which categorise living beings according to Social Darwinist notions of ‘fitness’. Not surprisingly, the issue of disability is linked to this strand of modernist monstrosity. As Alexa Wright observes, ‘monstrosity and disability are culturally encoded terms that often appear to overlap and are frequently confused’.<sup>43</sup> Modernist writers, whether wittingly or not, sometimes replicate this confusion in their work; in fact, figuring ‘unfit’, ‘dysgenic’, or disabled bodies as monstrous is one of the ways in which eugenicist modernists—such as W.B. Yeats in ‘The Second Coming’—engaged with contemporary notions of degeneration in their work.

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<sup>38</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 126.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey A. Johns, ‘A “Grievous Burthen”: Richard III and the Legacy of Monstrous Birth in *Disability, Health and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body*, ed. by Sujata Iyengar (New York: Routledge, 2014), 41-57 (p. 46).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Davidson, ‘Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 43.2 (2010) 207-226 (p. 219).

<sup>43</sup> Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 101.

These modernists use disability and monstrosity, often interchangeably, as tropes to register anxieties about the undoing of the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal.

Happily, this eugenicist strain of modernism could not hold back the enduring creative power of the monstrous and the horrific. From Lautréamont's *Maldoror* to Beckett's *The Unnamable*, the presence of the monstrous in modern literature seems to imply a link between uncontainable verbal inventiveness and the hybridisation of living forms. According to Harrow, the strong affective responses provoked by literary monstrosities awaken the critical faculties and prompt us to question social and political principles: 'The horror that has the power to scandalize (and fascinate) the reader is the necessary horror that nourishes critical lucidity and stimulates creativity as it challenges shibboleths, transforms degraded values, and renews poetic language'.<sup>44</sup> If monstrosity and modernism couple to breed hybrids of aesthetic and political radicalism, the creative force of monstrosity is also worth exploring in the context of degeneration. In principle, degeneration was (and is) characterised as 'abnormal', as pathological, and even as the fatal dissolution of living form. Yet the modernist aesthetics of the monstrous enable us to appreciate the prodigious creative force of degeneration. Monstrosity's generative aesthetic force can inspire aesthetic resistance to normative immunitary responses which seek to capture and expel the static image of the pathological type: the degenerate, the Jew, the homosexual, the criminal. In the second part of chapter 2, my focus is a reading of Mina Loy's novel *Insel* that is attuned to the interrelations between creativity and biological decay in the context of 1930s Europe. Loy's focus on the creative potential of Insel's 'degenerate' body alerts us to the dynamic forces released by decay and death, awakening readers to the germinal potential of the 'process of dissolution'.<sup>45</sup> This is what Esposito (following Deleuze) appreciates about the work of Francis Bacon; namely, that it demonstrates 'a different mode of understanding the relation between the phantasms of death and the power of life'.<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, death is no longer a contagious threat embedded in the undead tissue of the biological other. On the contrary, death becomes a vital force of evolution that exceeds individual bodies in order to generate the continuous creation of new forms. As Esposito has pointed out, the 'aesthetic nervature' of degeneracy is already present in the 'category of "decadentism"' and in Nordau's claims about the association between the degenerate and the modern artist'.<sup>47</sup> More importantly, he contends that a counter-current in degeneration theory 'assumes and valorizes the different, the dissimilar, and the abnormal inasmuch as they are innovative and transformative aspects of reality'.<sup>48</sup> Degeneration is not just the ruin of form. Rather, it is the name of the creative force of decay which animates morphological alteration and metamorphosis. A harbinger of creative destruction, the

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<sup>44</sup> Harrow, p. 146.

<sup>45</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 118.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 169.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp. 123-4.

degenerate is the biological double of the modernist artist devoted to renewing cultural forms. It should not, then, come as a surprise that Friedrich Nietzsche — the modernist philosopher *par excellence* — valued the innovative potential of biological decadence. Nietzsche's trust in the transformational potency of degeneration is implicit in his opposition to the conservative stability and 'normal' health favoured by the majority.<sup>49</sup> In a section of *Human, All too Human* entitled 'Ennoblement through Degeneration', Nietzsche makes this connection explicit by claiming that '[d]egenerate natures are of the highest significance wherever progress is to be effected. Every progress of the whole has to be proceeded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures *preserve* the type, the weaker help it to *evolve*'.<sup>50</sup> 'What Nietzsche admires', according to Elizabeth Grosz, 'is not so much a survival of the fittest, the norm, the well-adapted, the boring, as a survival of the noblest, of the exceptional, even the monstrous, the one who can bear to overcome, to become unrecognizably more'.<sup>51</sup>

Like Nietzsche, Esposito affirms the transformational potency of forms of life that don't seek to preserve themselves by measuring up to external norms. While the Nazis treated the 'degenerate' as 'dead life or death that lives, a flesh without a body', Esposito reverses this evaluation by suggesting that 'flesh that isn't unified beforehand in organic form' could form the basis for an 'affirmative biopolitics'.<sup>52</sup> This 'flesh without a body' suggests new paths for thinking about life, particularly life that passes across the immunity divides of nation, race, and species. Esposito claims that the most compelling aesthetic correlate for this new thought of the flesh is Francis Bacon's paintings of warped meat. He detects a 'journey to the limits of the body' in Bacon's singular vision of carcasses traversed by nonorganic forces of movement and transformation.<sup>53</sup> In these paintings of 'the disfigured figure of butchered flesh', Esposito claims, we encounter the indistinction (what Deleuze calls the 'common fact') of human and animal.<sup>54</sup> Given the manifold images of deformed and twisted flesh in Bacon's oeuvre, I think it's safe to say that Bacon's non-representational (i.e. 'disfigured') carcasses are to Esposito's 'affirmative biopolitics' what the representational monsters in Stevenson, Wilde, and Stoker are to the negative biopolitics of Lombroso and Nordau.<sup>55</sup> While Bacon's 'disfigured' figures imply 'a different mode of understanding the relation between the phantasms of death and the power of life',<sup>56</sup> the representational monster of fin-de-siècle Gothic demonstrates that the 'autoimmunitary

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche qtd. in Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 97.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy Campbell, 'Interview: Roberto Esposito', *Diacritics*, 36.3 (Summer 2006), 49-57, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 168.

dream' of 'killing [...] death' by murdering the degenerate other 'can't do anything except reverse itself in the death of the same killer'.<sup>57</sup>

### Technology and Inorganic Life

In her pioneering study, *The Modernist Corpse* (2018), Erin E. Edwards 'takes a vitalist approach to the corpse in order to challenge the liberal humanist subject who has traditionally defined itself against a world of inertly reified matter but who, in doing so, risks being conceptualized as "bare life" itself'.<sup>58</sup> She disinters the buried connections between the posthumous and the posthuman in American modernist texts, early Hollywood horror movies, and the media technologies of the Machine Age. Edwards adopts the 'flat ontology' of Deleuze's machinic vitalism, which enables her to attend to the liveliness of entities which from an anthropocentric standpoint appear to be nonliving. For this reason, she 'examines the corpse not from the human perspective of loss and mourning but rather as a site of disassemblage from the human and reassemblage with larger organic and technological networks'.<sup>59</sup> What this 'neovitalist' reading of the 'lively' corpse is missing is the fact that, as O'Gorman's has pointed out, a 'flat ontology is capable of provoking horror'.<sup>60</sup> There is indeed something horrifying about a posthumanist ontology from the standpoint of the anthropocentric subject: a living corpse; animated objects; losing one's sense of distinctness from nonhuman animals; or even wondering if humans have become more like things or if things have become more like humans. As Mullarkey suggests, these are hardly relaxing matters for subjects who are used to demoting nonhuman entities into the 'background' of their awareness: 'The horror of encountering unexpected alterity — from animals no longer taken as mere objects (and perhaps from objects no longer regarded as mere "objects" either) — doubtless stems from fear — what will happen to us in a democracy of all the living?'.<sup>61</sup> There has been some disagreement in literary posthumanist studies about the compatibility of flat ontologies with human flourishing. Edwards argues that a posthumanist critique of 'humanism's anthropocentric commitments' is consistent with 'the humanist aims of affirming the worth, dignity, and rights of all subjects'.<sup>62</sup> Mathew C. Taylor, on the other hand, diverges from such empowering assessments of the posthumanist turn by suggesting that the belief that 'we will benefit from "the collapse of ontological hierarchies" that separate us from the world betrays an incredible degree of optimism, even anthropocentrism, regarding our posthuman condition'.<sup>63</sup> The modernist bodies I study here remain monstrous to the extent that they do not fit into the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

<sup>58</sup> Erin E. Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse: The Posthumous and the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> O'Gorman, p. 185.

<sup>61</sup> Mullarkey, 'Tragedy of the Object', p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, pp. 9-10.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 7.



ready-made moulds of either humanist anthropocentrism or ‘our’ contemporary posthumanist theories. While recent posthumanist theories often assume that ‘affirmative self-world fusions’ will inevitably follow in the wake of the death of ‘Man’, the monstrous bodies studied here do enter into harmonious relations with their organic and technological environments.<sup>64</sup>

My reflections on the technological body in Lewis and Loy contributes to the cultural genealogy of artificial life that includes Jacques de Vaucanson’s digesting duck, Heinrich von Kleist’s marionettes, and E.T.A Hoffmann’s automata. Any attempt to answer the question of what counts as ‘life’ in this context will involve the effacement of distinct categories of being; as David Wills wryly admits in the introduction to his study *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life* (2016), the act of writing about extra-organic vitalities can engender ‘ontological oddities and monstrosities’.<sup>65</sup> According to Carroll’s definition, monsters, or ‘contradictory’ beings, resist categorisation, and are therefore ‘interstitial’ — ‘in terms of being both living and dead: ghosts, zombies, vampires’; or ‘entities that conflate the animate and the inanimate’.<sup>66</sup> A number of early twentieth-century thinkers and writers were fascinated by the interstitial zone between the animate and the inanimate, including Ernst Jentsch on the uncanny,<sup>67</sup> Henri Bergson on the comic,<sup>68</sup> and the aesthetic theorist Wilhelm Worringer on ‘the animation of the inorganic’.<sup>69</sup> Mullarkey has argued that ‘Bergson’s theory of the comical converges with the theory of horror [as defined by Carroll], namely that what is monstrous (or “horrific”) is an “anomalous being,” an abomination’.<sup>70</sup> Carroll’s ‘philosophy of horror’ is indebted to Mary Douglas’s theory of the origin of ideas of contagion, pollution, and ‘impurity’.<sup>71</sup> As Carroll notes, Douglas’s central thesis is that impurity arises from ‘the transgression or violation of schemes of cultural categorization’.<sup>72</sup> The concept of the impure is above all the motivation for human fears about dirt or ‘matter out of place’.<sup>73</sup> It provokes fascination *and* repulsion with the contagious or polluted, with the contamination of distinct categories, with the transgression of human orders of classification. Similarly, the varieties of mechanical or inorganic life that are present in the work of Jentsch, Bergson, and Worringer are instances of *animation out of place*. Bergson proposes that laughter is a response to humans failing to achieve or maintain the suppleness of life. For

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> David Wills, *Inanimation: Theories of Inorganic Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. x.

<sup>66</sup> Carroll, p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> Ernst Jentsch, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2.1 (1997), 7-16.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: MacMillan, 1911).

<sup>69</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. by Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), p. 77.

<sup>70</sup> John Mullarkey, ‘Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors’, in *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by S.E. Gontaski, Paul Ardoin, Laci Mattison (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 243-255 (p. 248).

<sup>71</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>72</sup> Carroll, p. 31.

<sup>73</sup> Douglas, p. 37.

this reason, the comic automaton does not remain fully living but contaminates the creativity of the organic with the dead repetition of the machine. As Mullarkey has put it: 'For Bergson, the purest abomination is of life becoming a machine, such that being the object of humour is a result of having lost one's vitality, of becoming a living machine, a ridiculous and monstrous hybrid'.<sup>74</sup> Regarded as humans who fail to match up to creativity of the *élan vital*, Bergson's living machines blur the dichotomy of life and nonlife, and their inferior vitality is therefore an example of animation 'out of place'. If Bergson's comic laughter rebukes the scandal of human inanimation, Worringer finds himself drawn 'joylessly' towards the uncanny or animistic life of inorganic matter.<sup>75</sup> According to Syros Papapetros, 'the animation of the inorganic promoted by Worringer is essentially an act of transgression: it heralds the infusion of life in a domain to which the animate did not formerly belong'.<sup>76</sup> Finally, Jentsch, in his theorisation of the uncanny, turns his attentions to the uncertainty or '*doubt as to whether an apparently inanimate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate*'.<sup>77</sup>

Lewis's technological bodies register the erosion of human mastery and the ontological distinction between life and death. Their technologically endowed animation confirms their demotion to the level of objects rather than their kinship with human or organic life. The Lewisian puppet's absence of ontological privilege often goes hand in hand with regression, which engenders an anachronistic fusing of the artificial body and the primordial body. As this study focuses on the retrogressive, backward-facing aspects of the modernist body, it is necessary to say a few words about Lewis's sense of the conjunction of technology and atavism. In his critique of behaviourism in *Time and Western Man* (1928), for example, Lewis highlights the ascendancy of 'instinct, that is muscular inherited habit' in behaviourist theory.<sup>78</sup> Instead of making a linear connection between behaviourism and the proliferation of technology in the machine-age, Lewis focuses on the archaic biological inheritance of instinct in his critique of behaviourist notion that 'the human body is a machine'.<sup>79</sup> It is this focus on the asynchronous conjunction of the primordial and the technological which generates much of the furious intensity of Lewis's satiric vision of the Machine Age. The exhibition 'Tyros and Portraits' at the Leicester Galleries in London 1921 provided Lewis with the occasion to introduce these atavistic puppets to the public as 'immense novices, brandishing their appetites in their faces'.<sup>80</sup> With its mammoth teeth and snarling laugh, we encounter the Tyro as an archaic survival of antediluvian origin; nonetheless, these 'barbarous' cartoons are adapted to the mechanized wilderness of post-war metropolis.

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<sup>74</sup> Mullarkey, 'Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors', p. 248.

<sup>75</sup> Worringer, p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> Syros Papapetros, *Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), p. viii.

<sup>77</sup> Jentsch, p. 11.

<sup>78</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993) p. 326.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Tyros and Portraits' in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 323-355 (p. 354).

Writing in the *The Daily Express* in 1921, Lewis promoted the ‘Tyro’ as an ‘animated, but artificial puppet, a “novice” of real life’.<sup>81</sup> Lewis’s eagerness to conflate the ‘raw’ and the ‘artificial’, despite the well-defined outlines of the monumental self-portrait, *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro*, reveals the complexity of his critique of his age. Behind Lewis’s protracted antagonism against his epoch there is a vision of the machine-age as archaic, primordial, backward, and unformed. It is striking how often this pairing of animation with the artificial body occurs in his work. What is more, Lewis frames his engagement with the artificial body in Bergsonian terms by suggesting that the mechanical motion of machines produces human inertia. This dialectic of vitalization and devitalization is present in *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), in which the nonhuman landscape comes to life in order to denature the human form and hasten its mechanical demise. Lewis explores the mediating role of cinema in forging the relationship between animated things and inert humans in his 1918 novel *Tarr*, which also dramatizes the links between inorganic life and organic death. I will argue that Lewis’s fascination with the horror of life becoming inert is implicated with his representation of dead bodies coming back to life. Lewis’s afterlife narrative, *The Childermass* (1928), reanimates the corpses of soldiers killed in World War One, and aligns their horrific mutilation with the de-privileging of the human in the anti-Cartesian philosophies of the 1920s. Accordingly, if Lewis’s fiction contributes to the modernist genealogy of animated things *and* inanimate humans, then his automata oscillate between the genres of comedy *and* horror. In ‘The Tragedy of the Object’, John Mullarkey suggests that

Bergson’s theory of the comic [...] converges with Noël Carroll’s theory of cinematic art-horror, namely that what is horrific is an “anomalous being,” a monstrous and repulsive combination of incompatible terms (life and death, for example, as in a zombie or a vampire. For Bergson, the purest such monster is life becoming mechanical, so that being the object of humour is a result of having lost one’s vitality, of becoming a living object, a ridiculous and potentially horrific hybrid.<sup>82</sup>

This hybrid of comedy and horror applies to Lewis’s automata insofar as they contribute to the comic *topos* of Bergson’s mechanical humans and the uncanny *topos* of Jentsch’s animate dolls. In *Snooty Baronet* (1932), the eponymous narrator comes face to face with an automaton installed in a shop window. Snooty duly explains that ‘the springs that actuated [the automaton’s] lips, nose and cheeks were excellently thought out. It was impossible as one watched him not to feel that he was in some real sense *alive*’.<sup>83</sup> However, the liveliness of this mechanical body is vitiated by its ‘enormous *chin*’ which is ‘non-mobile and lifeless’.<sup>84</sup> Snooty feels ‘intense uneasiness’ and ‘dark astonishment’ during his ‘strange encounter’ with this in/animate body;<sup>85</sup> if these affects invoke the genre of horror rather than comedy, then Lewis’s

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<sup>81</sup> Wyndham Lewis, ‘Dean Swift With a Brush. The Tyroist Explains His Art’ in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 359 (p. 359).

<sup>82</sup> Mullarkey, ‘Tragedy of the Object’, p. 48.

<sup>83</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), p. 133.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-6.

reference to James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) reinforces this underlying sense of fear. Snooty again: 'I turned away from the Hatter's window with a dense scowl settling upon my fact. As I looked up I saw, in great letters, posted across the façade of a Picture-theatre, the words —

#### THE MAN-MADE MONSTER.

Beneath this, in smaller letters, was the word Frankenstein'.<sup>86</sup> Whale's version of *Frankenstein* is the cinematic apotheosis of technological animation. In one of the most famous scenes in the history of film, Henry Frankenstein endows Karloff's monster with life. But 'he is not alive in the same way that the other characters in the film are. [...] This creature is made alive by electricity'.<sup>87</sup> In *Snooty Baronet*, Lewis reframes traditional conceptions of literary character to suggest that *all* humans are animated by technological forces in modernity. Secure distinctions between the human characters and their technological others break down. The result of mechanical animation in Lewis's work is nothing less than the total annihilation of personhood and the de-privileging the human species. In Snooty's meeting with the automaton we learn that such encounters between Lewis's characters and animated things dramatize the reduction of the former to the latter. According to Mullarkey, 'the origin of the comic is only the flip-side of the origin of horror: where the comical concerns what is alive *making itself* an inanimate object, horror relates to a subject *being made* into an object *by the actions of another* — even when that other is an object'.<sup>88</sup> But what happens when the objects that make subjects into objects themselves are literary characters? 'As the man beside me observed me putting on my hat', Snooty tells us, 'I was for the first time placed in the position *of the dummy*'.<sup>89</sup> The fact that Snooty's literary agent earlier refers to him as a 'made man' reinforces Snooty's association with the artificial.<sup>90</sup> Just as he lacks any sense of '*absolute*' distinction between himself and the automaton,<sup>91</sup> so he is 'apt to *go out* at any moment, and turn up again in some other place — like a light turned on by accident, or a figure upon a cinematographic screen'.<sup>92</sup> If 'film versions of *Frankenstein* implicitly remind us that filmmaking itself is a Frankensteinian exercise in artificial reproduction',<sup>93</sup> then Snooty's flickering presence anticipates Deborah Levitt's claim that '[c]inematic bodies exist in the space of an ontological crisis: Present or absent? Here or there? Living or dead?'.<sup>94</sup> While his lover and his literary agent both want him to '*become their*

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 989.

<sup>88</sup> Mullarkey, 'Tragedy of the Object', p. 48.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, p. 138.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>93</sup> Erin E. Edwards, p. 134.

<sup>94</sup> Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality, and the Futures of the Image* (Winchester: Zero, 2018), p. 17.

*Frankenstein*', Snooty seems to understand that he is already at one with the monster's interstitial life/death.<sup>95</sup>

### Theorising the Monstrous

The late nineteenth-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde once claimed that 'the normal type is the degree zero of the monstrosity'.<sup>96</sup> Tarde's formula implies a sliding scale of the monstrous, according to which the sociological 'normal type' is the antithesis of monstrosity. In presenting the norm and the monster as mutually constitutive categories, Tarde prefigures two influential theorists of monstrosity active in twentieth-century France: Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. For these thinkers, monstrosity and normality are inextricably related. As Derrida has put it:

monstrosity may reveal or make one aware of what the norm is and when this norm has a history—which is the case with discursive norms, philosophical norms, socio-cultural norms, they have a history—any appearance of monstrosity in this domain allows an analysis of the history of norms<sup>97</sup>

As norms change, so do the monstrosities which deviate from them. The cultural archive of the monstrous is like a reference library of exceptional bodies, wherein the effaced history of norms becomes legible once again. Likewise, Foucault claims that each historical regime of knowledge produces its own versions of the monstrous: 'there are monsters on the prowl', he insists, 'whose form changes with the history of knowledge'.<sup>98</sup> The history of the monstrous is essentially a relational one. The 'normal' and the 'abnormal' are by no means distinct categories that exist in a vacuum, nor do they have any trans-historical consistency; instead, each constitutes the limits of the other—indeed, frequently encroaches on the other—in a shifting pattern of historical negotiations and transformations. In his lectures on the 'abnormal' delivered at the Collège de France (1974-1975) Foucault argues that 'the monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table'.<sup>99</sup> These remarks point to the notion of monstrosity as an inherently transgressive form of being, which is one reason why late twentieth-century thinkers articulate monstrosity as a form of political resistance to the status quo. With reference to Foucault, Andrew Gibson has argued that 'On the far side of the world of the acceptable or manageable body [...] there is necessarily a realm of physical monstrosity to which belongs the inadmissibility, even the

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<sup>95</sup> Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, p. 131.

<sup>96</sup> Gabriel Tarde qtd. in George Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, trans. by Paolo Marrati and Todd Meyers (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 136.

<sup>97</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points....: Interviews, 1974-1994*, eds. by Elisabeth Weber, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 372-395 (pp. 385-386).

<sup>98</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse' in *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*, ed. by R. Young (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981), 48-78 (p. 60).

<sup>99</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 63

horror or disaster of the aberrant body'<sup>100</sup>. In short, monstrosity is a figure of transgression that exists beyond the limits of acceptable being as defined by modern biopower.

In contrast, pioneering scholars working in the field of disability studies have argued that the transgressive power of monstrosity diminished with the increased medicalisation of the modern body. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson puts it, 'while prodigious or "monstrous" bodies have always been a focus of human interest, the normal/abnormal dichotomy of the modern mind limits the explanation of differences to pathology'.<sup>101</sup> In the age of biopolitics, 'monstrous difference becomes deviant—abnormal—rather than as wholly distinctive'.<sup>102</sup> There has been a shift from a conception of monstrosity as 'wholly other' to a diversified field of pathological and deviant characteristics defined in relation to bodily norms.

Gibson's analysis of the 'aesthetics of monstrosity' in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) is indicative of the poststructuralist perspective on the monstrous:

*Molloy* is concerned with cripples, or the process of becoming crippled, and finds value in both. But if the cripple is marginalised by a given "anatamo-politics", he or she is nonetheless defined by and apprehensible in its terms. More important, here, is the extent to which Beckett's treatment of physical damage or deterioration is hyperbolic or "unreal".<sup>103</sup>

I want to think through what it might mean, in Gibson's terms, that a 'hyperbolic or "unreal"' depiction of physical deterioration mounts a challenge to the anatamo-politics of modernity. Beckett's hyperbolic depiction of corporeal impairment and deterioration is the basis for Gibson's conception of Molloy's 'rebellious monstrosity'.<sup>104</sup> While I agree with Gibson that 'excess is everywhere in the treatment of the body' in Beckett's novel, I would want to stress that it is as hyperbolic impairment and dysfunctionality (and hence lack) that this excess is mainly registered.<sup>105</sup> The transgressive potential of this reading rests upon Gibson's contention that '*Molloy* is concerned with cripples, or the process of becoming crippled, and finds value in both'.<sup>106</sup> He suggests two ways in which *Molloy* finds value in bodily impairment: first, the 'hyperbolic' impairment of Molloy's body is generative of the novel's aporetic narrative form; second, Molloy's hyperbolic impairments point to the gaps in the discursive construction of the human body.

For Gibson, the monstrosity of Molloy's body is a product of both excess and lack; or more accurately, an *excess of lack*. He explains that Beckett's 'hyperbolic' presentation of

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<sup>100</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 262.

<sup>101</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Poetry, Morrison, and Lorde' in *The Body and Physical Difference*, ed. by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 240-266 (p. 248).

<sup>102</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>103</sup> Gibson, *Towards*, p. 262.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 263.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 262.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

physical deformity provides a critique of modern ‘anatamo-politics’; yet underlying Gibson’s account of *Molloy*’s challenge to the disciplinary regime of modernity is the unspoken assumption that a resistance to biopower can be achieved by extending normative ideas about disability—in this instance, disability as ‘lack’—beyond the limits of the humanly conceivable. Molloy’s monstrosity ‘opens up a sense of the lack of all finality to discourses about the body.’<sup>107</sup> The impairment of Molloy’s body is taken to such exaggerated and hyperbolic extremes in the novel that his humanity is called into question. On Gibson’s reading, Molloy’s excessive lack of bodily cohesion and control points to ‘the lack of all finality to discourses about the body’.<sup>108</sup> This is the crux of postmodernist accounts of monstrosity: the ‘aberrant’ body exceeds all attempts to police the boundaries of the human.

A number of critics hostile to so-called French theory have claimed academic affirmations of the monstrous are emblematic of certain limitations inherent to postmodernist thought. The Marxist theorist David McNally, for instance, proposes that some self-appointed defenders of the monstrous reduce the complexity of social and biological being to the opposition between the normal and the abnormal.<sup>109</sup> In the work of these thinkers, McNally tells us, there is an automatic glorification of whatever seems to exist outside the strictures of normativity, a proclivity which he views as symptomatic of ‘a kind of one-dimensional thought’ endemic to postmodernism.<sup>110</sup> McNally insists that the way beyond this critical impasse is to treat ‘the arena of monstrosity as a site of contestation’<sup>111</sup>. To be sure, McNally’s dismissal of postmodernism is itself rather one-dimensional; yet his challenge to uncritical celebrations of monstrosity remains to some extent a valid one. In response, it is vital that we imagine new ways of writing about monstrosity that can attend in more nuanced ways to the anomalous body, and this would involve forgoing the tendency to celebrate monstrosity without reservation. We can begin to think in a more layered way about literary monstrosity by reviewing critical accounts of the representation of disability in modernist art and literature.

Lennard Davis, for instance, claims that ‘One of the ways that visual images of the disabled have been appropriated into the modernist and postmodernist aesthetic is through the concept of the “grotesque”’.<sup>112</sup> Davis’s critique of the modernist grotesque is threefold. First, modernists use the disabled body as an avatar for alterity or tragedy, obscuring the social reality of disability in the process. Second, the modernist fascination with the aesthetics of the ugly and the monstrous, both essential aspects of the grotesque, reinforces a negative image of

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Lennard Davis, ‘Nude Venuses, Medusa’s Body, and Phantom Limbs’ in *The Body and Physical Difference* ed. by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 51-70 (p. 64).

disability as abject. And in spite of the pervasiveness of disability in modernist artworks and writing, such works don't take into account the 'subject position' of disabled persons. For Davis, in short, it is difficult to distinguish between use and abuse when it comes to modernism's grotesque depictions of disability. Michael Davidson, on the other hand, gives a less critical account of the place of disability in 'the modernist obsession with the grotesque'.<sup>113</sup> According to Davidson, modernist artists and writers both validated the biopolitical ideology of their day and attempt to 'overcome it by acknowledging difference'.<sup>114</sup> These different readings of the significance of disability in the modernist grotesque indicate a schism in critical accounts of this important strain of modernism.

Consider the following assertion by Jonathan Greenburg: 'The grotesque can be seen as either a *problem*, a sign of a decadent and disordered world, or a *solution*, an aesthetic mode capable of representing the disorder to the world and presenting a reader or viewer with an authentic emotional experience'.<sup>115</sup> Disability can be rather neatly mapped onto Greenburg's distinction: on the one hand, 'conservative' modernists (Yeats, Eliot, Woolf, and so on) present the disabled body as a sign of degeneracy and disorder, measuring out their displeasure regarding the trajectory of modernity in broken limbs, diseased bodies, and circus 'freaks'; on the other hand, 'radical' modernists (Kirchner, Dix, Grosz, and so on) present the disabled body as a surface upon which to inscribe the traumas of capitalist modernity, thereby registering the distresses of technological warfare or their resistance to the consolidation of state-sanctioned repression. But this binary account of the modernist grotesque is problematic for several reasons. Most obviously, this distinction does little to challenge the critical cliché that there are, on the one hand, 'bad' (anti-humanist, anti-democratic) modernists and, on the other hand, 'good' (anti-authoritarian, politically subversive) modernists. In truth, the modernist grotesque is not simply a technique for 'othering' anomalous bodies, but nor can it be said to celebrate the variety of human bodily difference in a straightforward way.

But does monstrosity have any meaning in a world where '[i]dentity and difference, norm and monster become indistinguishable in a proliferation of differentiations and hybrids'?<sup>116</sup> Here, the scholar of Gothic literature Fred Botting argues that the erosion of ontological distinctions in postmodernity neutralizes the monstrous: 'Monsters of modernity, once the exceptions giving shape, difference and substance to the systems that excluded them, become normal'.<sup>117</sup> The monstrous renounces its horror along with its 'dissident' political

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<sup>113</sup> Michael Davidson, 'The Rage of Caliban: Disabling Bodies in Modernist Aesthetics', *Centre for Medical Humanities* (University of California, October 2013) <[https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/fadss/Lect\\_3\\_Rage\\_of\\_Caliban.pdf](https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/fadss/Lect_3_Rage_of_Caliban.pdf)> [Accessed: 5 April 2017] p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>115</sup> Jonathan Greenburg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>116</sup> Fred Botting, *The Limits of Horror: Technologies, Bodies, Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



agency. ‘Monsters no longer render norms visible; they are the norm’.<sup>118</sup> If ‘we have never been human’, then *they* have never been monstrous.<sup>119</sup> Is monstrosity even possible in a world without secure ontological distinctions?

Despite the compelling work of neo-materialists and other pioneers of the posthuman turn, it would of course be overstating matters to say that we live in a world free from the political *effects* of ontological hierarchies. The work of Lewis, Loy, and Beckett I examine here mark a distinctive moment in the cultural genealogy of posthumanism, not because they register the succession of ‘wounds’ dealt out to *Anthropos* by the end of the nineteenth century (though each of them does),<sup>120</sup> but because their work registers the de-privileging of ‘Man’ *together with* the ‘perpetual, insistent and demonic return of anthropocentrism’.<sup>121</sup> Claire Colebrook’s telling allusion to the ‘demonic return’ of anthropocentrism is a reminder that the monstrous does not always belong on the side of difference. The tension between the stubborn persistence of human exceptionalism and the horror that attends the loss of ontological privilege is a recurrent presence in the texts I study.

### Chapter Summaries

My first chapter proposes that Lewis’s work turns its back on linear ideas of technological development and posits that the connection between the primeval and the technological is fundamental to modernity. To that end, I examine the interrelations between automation and ‘barbarous’ pre-historic forces in his work. A central focus of this chapter is the mutable relations between characters and things as they stir into life or, conversely, lose their dynamism and become ossified and inert. I begin with a brief analysis of Lewis’s fascinating relation to vitalism and the ‘primitive’, exploring his rewriting of the non-modern body as a machine body. I follow this with a reading of Lewis 1914 closet-drama *Enemy of the Stars*, which poses the mechanical human against the remote inhuman agencies from distant times and spaces. Characters become lifeless mechanisms, whilst the nonhuman landscape surges with violent energies and forces that deprive the human of its aspirations for transcendence. I continue my exploration of the atavistic automaton in a reading of *The Childermass* that studies the links between Lewis’s critique of the mechanization of life and his reading of modernity as an atavistic epoch. I read Lewis’s depiction of the metamorphoses of the soldier’s fragmented corpse as satires of Bergsonian philosophy of ceaseless change and becoming. Next I study the role of cinema in Lewis’s *Tarr*, showing that for Lewis it was the very dynamism of early cinema that makes it an atavistic technology. While Lewis denounces Bergson’s vitalism, his

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>119</sup> Nicholas Gane and Donna Haraway, ‘When We Have Never Been Human, What Is To Be Done’, *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 33.7-8 (December 2006), 135-158 (p. 135).

<sup>120</sup> Christopher Peterson, *Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 15.

<sup>121</sup> Claire Colebrook, ‘Not Symbiosis, Not Now: Why Anthropogenic Change is Not Really Human’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 34.2 (2012), 185-209 (p. 202).

disapproval of technological animation of the body recalls Bergson's well-known critique of the cinematograph. Following Bergson's anti-cinematic musings in *Creative Evolution* (1907), Lewis associates the technological life of the cinema and the modern city with atavism, degeneration, and mechanical death.

Chapter 2 examines monstrosity in Mina Loy's poetry and prose in light of her engagement with discourses of degeneration and atavism. First, I ask if Loy's representations of dysgenic bodies should give those critics pause who read her work in conjunction with the anti-normative projects of Gilles Deleuze and his intellectual successors. In particular, I think through the validity of reading Loy's Bergsonism as evidence of her incipient posthumanism, taking issue with recent studies that read Loy's work as a challenge to anthropocentric investments in human exceptionalism. While Loy's vitalist poetry does challenge the racialized misogyny of Futurist biopolitics, I demonstrate that her Bergsonian investment in fluidity and becoming informs the eugenicist aspects of her own work. For this reason, I focus on poems where Loy links the atavistic (or dysgenic) body to immobility and mechanical repetition. Like F.T. Marinetti, Loy temporalizes Bergson's distinction between inert matter and the *élan vital*: the past is mechanical and dead; the future is open to the continuous creation of new forms. Also like Marinetti, Loy's eugenicist attitudes map onto this temporal division between the living and the nonliving. The second part of this chapter argues that Loy's novel *Insel* overturns her earlier attitudes to technology and degeneration. While Loy's early poems convey her animus against inertia of the machine, *Insel* presents media technologies as agents of becoming and metamorphosis. Insel's art is coterminous with his body. He is a degenerate artist whose monstrous creations are mirrors of their maker. While growth and decay are indistinguishable in his monstrous paintings, his body is an 'animate cadaver' which is decomposing and yet enlivened by the innovative forces of media technologies.<sup>122</sup> Here atavism is not a return to fixed and superseded forms but a deformation of the present, not a revival of a static point in the past but a blurring of the distinction between past, present and future. As such, Insel's multitemporal body is an example of what Norah Campbell and Mike Saren call *proto-atavism*: 'Proto-atavism is the argument that multiple paradigms of life exist on the peripheries of human life. Ancient and future evolutionary traits exist in the present — both in the aesthetic imagination and everyday life'.<sup>123</sup> If Loy's work enacts the futurist aspiration to 'forget all form' in order to 'draw forth incipient form', the images of monstrosity in *Insel* contribute to this aesthetic amnesia.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, there is a complex negotiation in Loy's work between forgetting and creation, which in turn expresses a destructive urge to negate the known and familiar, and to arrive at the future via an atavistic return to the inception of Bergson's 'germinal

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<sup>122</sup> Mina Loy, *Insel* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House Publishing 2014), p. 50.

<sup>123</sup> Norah Campbell and Mike Saren, 'The Primitive, Technology, and Horror: A Posthuman Biology', *Ephemera*, 10.2 (2010), 152-176 (p. 154).

<sup>124</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 20.

life-force'.<sup>125</sup> Atavism may denote a kind of intergenerational recollection; but it can also suggest revisiting an inhuman past effaced from the archive of cultural and biological memory. By bringing us into contact with traits from the forgotten past that are reanimated in the present, atavism may in turn stir a desire to forget fixed and static ideas of the human form. In turn, this stirs the artist to reimagine the body's ability to communicate with humans, animals, and technologies.

In Chapter 3 I want to study and theorise the relationship between Beckett's anti-vitalism and his fascination with the monstrous. As in previous chapters, I address the relationship between the animalization of the human and the revivification of the corpse. First I consider *Echo's Bones* as a parody of Joyce's association of physical degeneration with fecundity and aesthetic creativity. After discussing Joyce's engagement with the aesthetics of degeneration, I read the decadent tropes in *Echo's Bones* as a critique of modernist anti-Cartesian tropes of productive life. Drawing on the work of Claire Colebrook, I argue that the reanimation of the poet Belacqua is the occasion for a devitalization of sexual reproduction and the literary text. This leads me to sketch out some differences between Joyce's and Beckett's responses to positivist outrage against the 'degeneracy' of modernist form. What I will propose here is that Beckett's parody of Joyce's vitalization of decay can be read as an anticipatory critique of neovitalist affirmations of the *zoë* of the corpse. The second section of Chapter 3 deals with Beckett's experience of the censorship of modernist art during his visit to Nazi Germany in 1937. This section studies Beckett's responses to censored artists and considers aspects of their work that are analogous to Beckett's experiments with literary form. Here I shift my attention to *The Unnamable's* presentation of flesh that exceeds the limits of the 'carnal envelope'.<sup>126</sup> Refusing to position his art as a transcendent activity free from complicity, Beckett's novel opens up a space of uncertainty between artistic creativity and biopolitical violence.

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<sup>125</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'Bergson and Creative Evolution/Involution' in *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 146-167 (p. 157).

<sup>126</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, ed. by Steve Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 43.

## CHAPTER ONE: WYNDHAM LEWIS AND REGRESSIVE TECHNOLOGY

### Introduction: Living Machines and Atavistic Automata

Puppets, automata, animated corpses. The bodies in Wyndham Lewis's painting and writing inhabit a 'nonorganic' universe in which the divide between humans and things is often indistinct. Characters become de-animated and inert, whilst the energies or forces animating objects often outdo the circumscribed powers of human action. While these animated things underscore the lifelessness of characters, the sudden reanimation of a character's body doesn't deliver their return to personhood. Characters moved by actions, sensations, or affects lose possession of their trivial fund of will and agency. In this way, excessive displays of emotion result in the total dispossession of consciousness and personhood, so that his characters become mechanical or 'inanimate' when they are most active or impassioned. If this blurring of the distinction between the animate and the inanimate is essential to Lewis's fiction, then it is most striking in his implacable reduction of humans to things. To be sure, the fact that Hugh Kenner refers to Lewis's literary works prior to *The Revenge for Love* (1937) as 'puppet-fiction' indicates how pervasive reified characters are in his stories and novels.<sup>127</sup> But what are these automata: things masquerading as literary characters; or characters made into mindless things? According to Alan Cholodenko, '[t]he automaton confuses the either/orism of *either* a living being turning into an inanimate thing *or* an inanimate thing turning into a living being'.<sup>128</sup> This confusion is at the heart of Lewis's meditation on the entwinement of organic life and technology in early twentieth-century culture. For David F. Channell, circa 1900 momentous innovations in the scientific management of labour and industrial production 'began to erase the boundary between technology and the organic'.<sup>129</sup> Such linear histories of technology posit that the erosion of human/machine dichotomy occurred in response to the entanglement of organic bodies and machines in modernity in general, and in the era of Fordism and Taylorism in particular.<sup>130</sup> It is arguable that modernist scholarship has not sufficiently interrogated the assumed connection between technological development and the unidirectional time of linear historiography.

The correlation between modernism, technology, and the new is at the heart of critical accounts of prosthetic bodies in modernist culture. Hal Foster has analysed the formative

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<sup>127</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (London: Methuen and Co, c1954), p. 97

<sup>128</sup> Alan Cholodenko, 'Speculations on the Animatic Automaton' in *The Illusion of Life 2: More Essays on Animation*, ed. by Alan Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 2007), 486-528 (p. 503).

<sup>129</sup> David Channell, *The Vital Machine: A Study of Technology and Organic Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 117.

<sup>130</sup> Jackie Stacey and Lucy Suchman, 'Animation and Automation – The Liveliness and Labours of Bodies and Machines', *Body and Society*, 18.1 (2012), 1-46 (p. 9).

significance of this correlation in his study *Prosthetic Gods* (2004). Regarding the duality of modernist attitudes to the machine at the beginning of the twentieth century, he argues that, 'for the most part, modernists of this time could only hope to resist new technologies in the name of some given natural body, or to accelerate them in the search for some imagined postnatural body'.<sup>131</sup> Modernist imaginings of the 'postnatural body' pointed toward a future that had yet to arrive; nonetheless, Foster's recourse to the Futurist rhetoric of acceleration makes it clear that 'the machinic imaginary of high modernism' located the germinal potential of this new body in the technological proliferation of the Second Industrial Revolution.<sup>132</sup> Foster implies that for Lewis and other modernists there was no root to the 'postnatural body' that did not first pass through the crucible of early twentieth-century machine technology. Further, Foster's term 'postnatural' implies that a linear conception of technological development is fundamental to modernist engagements with the prosthetic. The backward-facing stance of 'resist[ing] new technologies in the name of some given natural body' contrasts with the forward-facing 'search for some imagined postnatural body'.<sup>133</sup> With regards to the cultural history of technology, modernism marks a transitional moment in which the body is either a precarious vestige of the natural in an increasingly mechanized world, or a prototype for a future where nature is obsolete. That said, Foster is alert to Lewis's affirmation of 'a "primordialism" more radical than any primitivism'.<sup>134</sup> Even so, his claim that Lewis was motivated 'to embrace technology, to accelerate its transformation of bodies and psyches' reinforces the association between modernity, technology and transformational dynamism.<sup>135</sup> Jessica Burstein's description of the prosthetic body as 'the apotheosis of modernity' is even more direct in claiming that modernists viewed the machine as a signifier of historical rupture with a pre-technological past.<sup>136</sup> These critical accounts of prosthetic modernism rehearse a well-worn story about modernity and technology: namely, 'that in the age of mechanical reproduction the artificial has become a determining condition of modernity'.<sup>137</sup> As we will see, Lewis's challenge to this linear conception of technology is already conspicuous in his early quasi-primitive stories about Breton peasants.

Within normative framings of modernity, technology and the 'primitive' are frequently understood to be incompatible.<sup>138</sup> It is not surprising, then, that critics considering the connections between Lewis's work and posthumanism have emphasised the anticipatory

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<sup>131</sup> Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 109-110.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>136</sup> Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 71.

<sup>137</sup> Raymond Bellour, 'Ideal Hadaly', *Camera Obscura*, 5.3, (1986), 110-136, (p. 131).

<sup>138</sup> Norah Campbell, Michael Saren and Aidan Driscoll, 'The Primitive, Technology and Horror: A PostHuman Biology', *Ephemeria: Theory and Politics in Organisation*, 10.1 (2010), 152 -176 (p. 154).

aspects of his work. While Burstein reads Lewis's work as a founding example of 'cold modernism', which she argues is a strain of modernism that has all the characteristics that critics later attributed to postmodernism, John Whittier-Ferguson extends Burstein's argument into the futuristic realm of artificial intelligence and human extinction:

In our twenty-first-century moment, this ahumanist, "cold" Lewis is, I believe, on the cusp of a new (textual) life, or at least a new season of attention from the academy. The time is propitious. Our (Western, First World) carries us into the latest "post": posthumanism. [...] Lewis's comic, grotesque, incisive, deeply unsettling and sometimes objectionable art helps us to measure the importance and implications of books that might seem worlds apart from one another — like Sharon Cameron's *Impersonality*, and William Mitchell's *Me++* — and more than half the movies and games we watch and play, and drones and web crawlers, and even, as Alan Weisman and many others have proposed, the environment we are busy making for life on earth (or Eearth). [...] We may just be catching up with an avant-garde that Lewis believed the First World War has destroyed forever. Studying Lewis and his critics will help us to understand what joining that company may mean, how it may look and — if the verb is not outmoded — feel'.<sup>139</sup>

Whittier-Ferguson sees the connection between Lewis and posthumanism as a matter of the present catching up with a modernist future that never came to pass.<sup>140</sup> In contrast, this chapter proposes that for Lewis the technological body is bound up with the reappearance of earlier stages of 'primitive' or animal life. Amid a cacophony manifesto statements about the coalescence of machines, aesthetic innovation, and futurity, Lewis insisted on the assumed connection between the primordial and the technological. But Lewis's resistance to the connection between the future and the machine is not reducible to his rivalry with Marinetti. As we will see, Lewis's machine bodies expand the idea of atavism beyond its association with the animalization of the human. At the same time, he reimagines the technology as a primitive, antediluvian phenomenon that connects the instant of the present to the remote past. My proposal is that this has significant consequences for how we read the modernist techno-body and its relation to posthumanism. As a literary figure of technological modernity, the automaton is frequently seen as a figure which blurs the distinction between the organic and the machine. Instead of viewing the Lewisian body as a proto-cyborg, I will argue that his atavistic automata embody the temporal ambiguities of modernist culture. Atavism signals a return to the world *before* us rather the future-oriented *after* us anticipated by apocalyptic posthumanisms.<sup>141</sup> What emerges from Lewis's work is a posthumanism that is more oriented towards the past than the future. As Paul Sheehan suggests: "'post", most often taken to mean subsequent to

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<sup>139</sup> John Whittier-Ferguson, *Reading Late Wyndham Lewis: Critical Approaches*, *Oxford Handbooks Online* (University of Michigan, March 2016) <<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-92>> [8 March 2018].

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> For a brief discussion of Lewis's posthumanism in this context, see John Whittier-Ferguson, 'Reading Late Wyndham Lewis: Critical Approaches', n.p.

(*postpartum*), can also denote behind or posterior to (*postorbital*).<sup>142</sup> Being behind the human could signify ideas of inheritance, of genealogy, of the ancestral forces that came before the human, and thus in some degree made the emergence of the human possible. In contrast, Lewis imagines the reappearance of ‘earlier’ stages of human development, or even returning to periods of time which precede the human, as bound up with modernity’s unrelenting assaults on humanity’s aspirations for uniqueness.

My reading of Lewis’s technological bodies parts ways with accounts that underplay or even take no notice of his opposition to mechanised life. As I’ve already mentioned, Foster argues that the prosthetic bodies in Lewis’s Vorticist paintings express ‘the desire to embrace technology, to accelerate its transformation of bodies and psyches’.<sup>143</sup> The ascendancy of machine technology alienates human beings from themselves and threatens the agency and integrity of the autonomous self; yet the monadic ego will only survive by reclaiming — increasing, escalating — its own self-estrangement. Foster explains that Lewis strives ‘to imagine a “new ego” that can withstand the shocks of the military-industrial, the modern-urban, and the mass-political, that can forge these stimuli into a new protective shield, convert them into a new hardened subject able to *thrive* on such shocks’.<sup>144</sup> This means that Lewis conceives of prosthesis as above all a compensatory extension of the sovereign masculine self; a ‘form of ego armouring’.<sup>145</sup> According to Foster, Lewis sacrifices the organicism of the human body in order to protect the male subject from the vulnerability inherent in organic life; and, for this reason, the ‘separation of the human [...] from its own intrinsic frailties’ in Vorticist art is ‘gist of [Lewis’s] anti-humanism’.<sup>146</sup> Burstein likewise contends that Lewis’s ‘cold modernism’ invests in the aesthetic potential of prosthesis. In Burstein’s view the prosthetic body does not secure the ego but rather expresses ‘a world without selves or psychology’.<sup>147</sup> Lewis’s characters are bodies dispossessed of personhood; for Burstein, this means that ‘the body is taken as the start and the finish of all explanation’.<sup>148</sup> Rather than shield the masculine ego from the depersonalizing forces of the Machine Age, the prosthetic body in ‘cold modernism offers an account of the human form in which the mind plays no role’.<sup>149</sup> But this reading strips Lewis’s work of its polemical edge by effacing his critical stance towards the erosion of the mind/body distinction. There is nothing in Lewis’s work to support the idea that he was indifferent to the genesis of ‘a world without selves’. Until we understand Lewis’s

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<sup>142</sup> Paul Sheehan, ‘Posthuman Bodies’ in *Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. by David Millman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 245-260 (p. 246).

<sup>143</sup> Foster, p. 114.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>147</sup> Burstein, p. 2.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

anthropocentric commitment to the value of human personhood, we won't understand why his work reinscribes 'human' characters as inert things without agency.

Both of these influential studies of the prosthetic body in Lewis's work emphasise the importance of technology over questions of atavistic life and the animal. This chapter addresses these underexplored topics in Lewis's work, and proposes that they are vital to his engagements with the body. Accordingly, the vitalism of Lewis's early writings sheds light on the inception of Lewis's lifelong resistance to the mechanization of life. In a sense, the years 1909-1916 form the first significant period of Lewis's written engagement with the human body, both in literary and theoretical terms. In these years a number of developments informed or provoked his thinking about bodies. First, as Jamie Wood has suggested, Lewis's 1910 essay 'Our Wild Body', his first publication in *The New Age*, responded to British anxieties about 'national decline' after the military humiliations of The Second Boer War (1899-1902) had placed the male physique at the centre of political discussion.<sup>150</sup> 'Our Wild Body' takes aim at the fascination with exercise and body-building that was a notable feature of Edwardian culture. According to Wood, Lewis is 'perhaps correctly diagnosing that the English physical culture movement owed at least part of its origin to debates associated with the physical deterioration of English soldiers during the South African War of 1899'.<sup>151</sup> In 1904, parliament set up the Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration to investigate claims about the diminishing health of the national body.<sup>152</sup> Around the turn of the century, then, securing the nation increasingly entailed fortifying the male body, and so-called 'manly' traits such as physical strength and willpower became an index of the country's future prosperity and international standing.<sup>153</sup> Partly in response to these historical pressures, the promotion of physical exercise and the cultivation of 'manly' bodies became increasingly widespread. Between 1900 and 1910 all-male societies promoting weightlifting and callisthenics began to appear throughout the country, offering new forums for the expression of masculine identity through bodily discipline.<sup>154</sup> In addition, the rise of eugenics as a discourse of national regeneration around the turn of the century contributed to the 'biologisation of national belonging'.<sup>155</sup> It was in this context that the first recorded use of the term 'bio-politics' appeared in a 1911 article by G.W. Harris, also published in *The New Age*.<sup>156</sup> Crucially, Harris's brief

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<sup>150</sup> Jamie Wood, "'On or About December 1910": F.T. Marinetti's Onslaught on London and Recursive Structures in Modernism', *Modernist Cultures*, 10.2 (2015), 135-158 (p. 153).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder c. 1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 185.

<sup>153</sup> Anna Loutfi, 'Eugenic Nationalism, Biopolitics and Masculinization of Hysteria: Historical and Theoretical Reflections' in *Masculinities and the Nation of the Modern World: Between Hegemony and Marginalization*, ed. by Pablo Dominuez Anderson and Simon Wendt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 55-70 (pp. 56-57).

<sup>154</sup> Wood, pp. 151-152.

<sup>155</sup> Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, p. 112.



essay 'Bio-Politics' not only expresses anxiety about '[t]he present condition of the nations of Europe,' but also promotes a lethal eugenicist programme for English national regeneration.<sup>157</sup>

Recalling the contested status of the English body around 1910 helps to illuminate Lewis's ambivalent perspective on the question of national regeneration. Writing as a critic of modernity, in 'Our Wild Body' he outlines his objections to the national attitude to the body in England, asserting that the English are disciplining and denaturing the body, and thereby taming the instincts of life. He contends that a 'vast Anglo-Saxon conspiracy against the body' reigns in England, putting the country at a disadvantage with respect to its more vital continental rivals.<sup>158</sup> Just as Lewis blasts the 'ham and conventional outlook towards the body' adopted by the 'callisthenic quack', so he insists that the English passion for sport and exercise obscures the fact that Englishmen have lost touch with their bodies:

We perpetuate in our games the primitive art of war — the triumph that, relying on mere skill, and physical strength and courage, one man or company of men may gain over another. But it is artificial and no longer a vital and fundamental part of life, this exercise of our strength. [...] "[T]he famous warlike spirit of the race" is diminished by these score of substitutes for war. It need not be, but it is.<sup>159</sup>

There is no suggestion of a eugenicist programme for improving the health of the national body in Lewis's essay. 'It is not...the body that is ailing,' he argues, 'but our idea of the body'.<sup>160</sup> Thus, the English need a new way of thinking about the body, perhaps a new philosophy of the body — the examples of Bergson in France and Nietzsche in Germany were undoubtedly on Lewis's mind.<sup>161</sup> Nonetheless, contemporary anxieties about the condition of English bodies are not far from the surface. As Paul Peppis has argued, 'Our Wild Body' 'diagnose[s] a national disease, suggest[s] a cure, and project[s] a renewed nation'.<sup>162</sup> Lewis's essay thus partakes in the quest for national regeneration through bodily reform central to modernist-era biopolitics. How, though, did Lewis think this renewal was to be achieved?

Dismissing the nationalised body of early 1900s England, Lewis instead affirms the irrational core of 'life', echoing the vitalism of his European contemporaries.<sup>163</sup> Given the astonishing cultural impact of Bergson's vitalism and Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie*, especially their respective assaults on the 'anti-life' values of European modernity, Lewis was by no means alone in promoting 'life' as a rallying cry against, in Nietzsche's formulation, 'despisers of the body'.<sup>164</sup> When Lewis argues that the exercise equipment that adorns the walls

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<sup>157</sup> G.W. Harris, 'Biopolitics', *The New Age*, 10.9 (1911) p. 197.

<sup>158</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Our Wild Body', 1910, in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 251-258 (p. 251).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>161</sup> Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics, and The English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 51.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. by Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 30.

of Edwardian households doesn't enhance the body but rather serves to 'indebt it to science and tame it', he represents scientific rationalism as an antagonist of life.<sup>165</sup> 'Every natural and heroic gesture and energetic impulse,' Lewis claims, 'has had the life taken out of it'.<sup>166</sup> Again, this is a post-Nietzschean rhetorical strategy. As Donna V. Jones has aptly put it: 'From Nietzsche [...] it was learned that there was no more decisive technique than to paint one's enemies as against life'.<sup>167</sup> By casting the English as anti-life conspirators, Lewis's critique co-opts the polemical tactics of life philosophy for the sake of reconnecting the English body with the foundations of its vitality. What is significant here is that Lewis advocates a renewal of the English body not through the prevailing scientific doxa or pseudo-medical fads of the period, but instead through reembracing the vital impulses that have been tamed by the 'civilizing' practices of modern English culture.<sup>168</sup> Thus, 'Our Wild Body' departs from the two most prominent ideologies of bodily reform available in England in 1910. Not only is eugenics absent from Lewis's essay but he is also dismissive of the fashion for physical culture or bodybuilding: 'The body of the contemporary man is the prey of mercenary "strong men," he is lured with their muscle manufactories, or, to be more accurate, it is body that they almost suck in, by the mere brute magnetism of size'.<sup>169</sup> In suggesting that the promotion of a strong masculine physique fails to connect the body with the 'vital and fundamental part of life',<sup>170</sup> he identifies the technological measures intended to regenerate the nation as strategies for 'daunting and taming the body'.<sup>171</sup> Against the Edwardian orthodoxy that 'the British "race" was suffering from a degeneration which only hard-nosed, coolly-implemented scientific measures could repair',<sup>172</sup> Lewis asserts that these rationalist methods for renewing the national body are, to use Herbert Schnäbelbach's phrase, 'hostile to life'.<sup>173</sup>

Life's foundational significance in Lewis's work remains underexplored and misunderstood. Vitalism — the philosophy of life that most critics claim Lewis rejected or overcame after his youthful investment in Bergson's ideas — is a formative aspect of his mature work in that he opposes it and yet continues to carry out a critique of the mechanization of life informed by Bergson's vitalist 'reaction to mechanisms, mechanical laws, machines, and automatons'.<sup>174</sup> Lewis's residual vitalism is nowhere evident that in his life-long critical resistance to automatism or mechanical life. Even if vitalist thinkers often affirm the creative

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<sup>165</sup> Lewis, *Our Wild Body*, p. 251.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

<sup>167</sup> Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism and Modernity* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 58.

<sup>168</sup> Peppis, *Literature*, p. 50.

<sup>169</sup> Lewis, 'Our Wild Body', p. 252.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p. 253.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

<sup>172</sup> Dan Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 116.

<sup>173</sup> Herbert Schnäbelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933*, trans. by Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 139.

<sup>174</sup> Jones, p. 28.

and redeeming powers of the life force, the leitmotif that binds disparate vitalist projects is their resistance to the tyranny of the mechanical over the living. Georges Canguilhem, for example, argues that '[t]he rebirths of vitalism translate...life's permanent distrust of the mechanization of life. In them we find life trying to put mechanism back in its place through life.'<sup>175</sup> Modernist vitalism emerged as a response to industrialization and the dominance of mechanistic reasoning in post-Enlightenment thought. Jones explains that 'doctrinal vitalism has [...] remained a critical project, defined less affirmatively than as a negation and of its own negation — the mechanical, the machinic, and the mechanistic'.<sup>176</sup> This 'negative' definition, based on a critical resistance to the machine rather than an affirmation of life, enables us to reassess the critical commonplace that Lewis rejected vitalism after his youthful apprenticeship in Bergson's philosophy of life. Take Omri Moses claim that 'Lewis repudiates his own early flirtation with vitalism and responds by forging a "cold modernism" (in Jessica Burstein's phrase), renouncing feeling and embracing a line of evolution approximating the insect's that indicates "the inertia of the *élan vital*"'.<sup>177</sup> Conversely, I want to propose that '[t]he fear of "becoming automaton" [that] haunts Bergson's thought from beginning to end' informs Lewis's sense of the coalescence of modernity and the pre-human.<sup>178</sup> In Lewis's work, the reappearance of 'superseded' epochal forces is less an outcome of biological heredity than of the mechanization of life.

Lewis conflates machine-production and evolution: every organism is a machine; every machine is an organism.<sup>179</sup> This Vorticist insistence on the mechanization of life and the vitalization of the machine testifies to their mutual contamination. What is under consideration here is what David Wills has called 'the originary mechanics at work in the evolution of the species'.<sup>180</sup> This turn to the pre-human origins of the machine evokes a resistant attitude to the forward-facing momentum of technological development. It is impossible to miss the extent of this resistance in Lewis's claim that 'the artist is older than the fish'.<sup>181</sup> Creativity as Lewis conceives it entails a reaching back beyond existing forms 'to strike the fundamental slime of creation. And it is the condition, the very first gusto of creation in this scale of life in which we are set, that [the artist] must reach, before he [*sic*], in turn, can create'.<sup>182</sup> With this call to re-encounter 'the fundamental slime of creation', Lewis chides 'primitivism' for not being primitive enough. Only by reaching much further back in time will the artist be able create

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<sup>175</sup> Georges Canguilhem qtd. in Jones, p. 28.

<sup>176</sup> Jones, p. 28.

<sup>177</sup> Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 201.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>179</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex?*, 1919, trans. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p. 78.

<sup>180</sup> David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back to Through Technology and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>181</sup> Lewis, *The Caliph's Design*, p. 65.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

genuinely new forms. I take these remarks to be a decisive rejection of the utopian investment in the connection between technology and the future. In *The Caliph's Design*, technological innovations are reconfigured as archaic forms whose repetition ensures that the forward momentum of modernity remains in touch the remote evolutionary past. Technological novelty is, in this sense, not an advance in the sense of a break with the past, but a reminder of the continuity between the form-generating powers of evolution and the form-generating powers of human artifice. Art and the related domain of the technological neither precede life nor follow in its wake: 'The creation of the work of art is an act of the same description as the evolution of wings on the sides of a fish, the feathering of its fins; or the invention of a weapon within the body of a hymenopter to meet the terrible needs of its life'.<sup>183</sup> It is worth stressing that the mechanization of life, from the perspective of Vorticist art, is not a recent event: the industrial forces of the Machine Age are not to blame for reifying 'life' as organic form 'is too material to be anything but a mechanism, and the seagull is not far removed from the hydroplane'.<sup>184</sup> But even though his work is crowded with figures of artificial life as puppets, dolls, automata, and marionettes, he is rather orthodox in his conception of the difference between humans and machines.

Despite his views about the identity of technology and life, he insists that the ghost of personhood transcends the machine of the body. According to Lewis, the 'body is, in a sense (in the things that happen to it, if that is possible, independently of the mind), as unimportant by itself as the materials by which it is surrounded — its clothes, tables and chairs, dust on the road, or bricks of the house. Disconnect it from the person, if that may be, and it is *dead*'.<sup>185</sup> He further suggests that 'human fallibility' is implicated with the idea that 'our consciousness is bound up with this non-mechanical phenomenon of life; that, although helpless in the face of the material world, we are in some way superior to and independent of it; and that our mechanical imperfection is the symbol of that'.<sup>186</sup> As David Dwan astutely observes: "For all the talk of Lewis's 'antihumanism', he was reluctant to retire a normative conception of humanity in which freedom was a fundamental value".<sup>187</sup> Ironically, the figure widely held to be one of modernism's most controversial anti-humanists consistently promoted the free, rational, self-determined subject.<sup>188</sup> For Lewis, bodies without consciousness belong to 'same impersonal order as a bit of cloth, a lump of clay, a sponge, [or] a vegetable'.<sup>189</sup> The affirmation

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>185</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, 1926, ed. by Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 211.

<sup>186</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time', *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, ed. by Wyndham Lewis, 2 (1922), 22-37 (p. 26).

<sup>187</sup> David Dwan, 'The Problem of Romanticism in Wyndham Lewis', *Essays in Criticism*, 65.2 (2015), 163-186 (p. 165).

<sup>188</sup> For a detailed analysis of Lewis's 'defence of the rational subject' see Andrzej Gąsiorek, "'The Cave-Men of the New Mental Wilderness': Wyndham Lewis and the Self in Modernity", *Wyndham Lewis Annual*, IV (1999), pp. 5-11.

<sup>189</sup> Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, p. 212.

of human personhood in Lewis's thinking illustrates the anthropocentric bias that, according to Arthur Bradley, is the unacknowledged kernel of the philosophical tradition of 'originary technicity', from Karl Marx's materialism to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Mark B. Hanson's posthumanist media theory. For Bradley, 'the theory of originary technicity claims to reveal the essential "technicity" of life itself' [...] but [...] it conveniently privileges *one* form of life over all others'.<sup>190</sup> He continues: 'originary technicity [...] still remains in the thrall of what Agamben calls the anthropological machine: it is a mechanism for producing and recognising the being that we ourselves are'.<sup>191</sup>

Many scholars have noted that the Wild Body stories do not conform to standard definitions of primitivism. From the beginning of his career, Lewis dissociated his use of the 'primitive' from the conception of a pre-technological age of human (or organic) innocence. He describes the Wild Body stories as 'studies of rather primitive people'.<sup>192</sup> Yet, these 'creaking men machines' are suspended between atavism and modernity, a 'uncivilized' past and the technological present.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, what makes Lewis's early forays into primitivism so distinctive is that he is clearly fascinated by the anarchic energies of the 'uncivilized' body and yet he seems to deconstruct the very opposition between the modern and the premodern. Like Donna Haraway's cyborg, the Wild Body is a figure of 'anti-modern monstrosity'<sup>194</sup> that thrives on the interpenetration of the organic and the machine, human and nonhuman, civilization and barbarism: 'The Wild Body is this supreme survival that is us, the stark apparatus with its set of mysterious spasms: the most profound of which is laughter'.<sup>195</sup> Its automatic laughter signals both its atavism and that it belongs among the technological bodies of Machine Age culture; and it thus runs counter to historiographical narratives which posit technology as a progressive and forward-facing force.<sup>196</sup> The Wild Body's laughter shares certain characteristics with the automatisms which Bergson sees as the root of the comic. Its 'gigantic spasm of laughter'<sup>197</sup> is an ex ample of mindless automatism or 'automatic gesture'.<sup>198</sup> Yet, for this reason, the Wild Body's automatic mirth goes against the grain of Bergson's conclusions about the nature of the comic. Laughter for Bergson is a corrective to the automatisms that make human beings resemble a living mechanism; for Lewis, by contrast, laughter is itself an automatic spasm that reveals the human's fundamental proximity to animal instinct and the mindless repetition of

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<sup>190</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Originary Technicity: The Theory of Technology from Marx to Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', 1927, in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 149-154 (p. 149).

<sup>193</sup> Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', p. 149.

<sup>194</sup> Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 231.

<sup>195</sup> Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', p. 152.

<sup>196</sup> Foster, p. 148.

<sup>197</sup> Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', p. 151.

<sup>198</sup> Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 120.

machines.<sup>199</sup> What this automatic, mechanical hilarity foregrounds is not just the technicity of its 'automatic unconscious life' but the return of the animal prehistory of the human species.<sup>200</sup> As Gordon has pointed out, circa 1900 'automatisms signal[led] evolutionary regression and degeneration'.<sup>201</sup> The description of the Bestre's eyebrows functioning like a 'monkey-on-a-stick mechanical pull' likewise forges a connection between mechanical gestures and evolutionary regression. For Charles Darwin, as Gordon notes, laughter was primary evidence of the 'origin' of human emotions in the animal past.<sup>202</sup> 'We may confidently believe', claimed Darwin in his 1872 study, 'that *laughter* as a sign of pleasure or enjoyment, was practiced by our progenitors long before they deserved to be called human; for very many kinds of monkeys, when pleased, utter a reiterated sound, clearly analogous to laughter'.<sup>203</sup> By the same token, the Wild Body announces its animality in spasms of laughter. 'Laughter', Lewis tells us, 'is the bark of delight of a gregarious animal at the proximity of its kind'.<sup>204</sup> Ker-Orr even boasts that after one of his comic skirmishes he 'howled like an exultant wolf'.<sup>205</sup> 'Laughter does not progress. It is primitive, hard and unchangeable'.<sup>206</sup> 'The Wild Body', according to Lewis, 'is that small, primitive, literally antediluvian vessel in which we set out on our adventures'.<sup>207</sup> Yet this atavistic body, primordial in origin, is artificial, constructed, and technological; it blurs the divide between life and mechanism. The revised version of the story 'Bestre' (1927) includes a grotesque description of the title character's hybridised body:

His very large eyeballs, the small saffron ocellation in their centre, the tiny spot through which light entered the obese wilderness of the body; his bronzed bovine arms, swollen handles for a variety indolent little ingenuities; his inflated digestive case, lent their combined expressiveness to say these things; with every tart and biting condiment that eye-fluid, flaunting of fatness (the well-filled), the insult of the comic, implications of indecency, could provide. Every variety of bottom-tapping resounded from his dumb bulk. His tongue stuck out, his lips eructated with the incredible indecorum that appears to be the monopoly of liquids, his brown arms were for the moment genitals, snakes in one massive twist beneath his mamillary slabs, gently riding on a pancreatic swell, each hair on his oil-bearing skin contributing its message of porcine affront'.<sup>208</sup>

The jagged rhythm of these sentences, which swell — like Bestre himself — in an excess of anatomical details, reflects the radical disjunction between the human, animal and machine parts of Bestre's 'wild body'. The direct literary precedent for this description is the satire of

<sup>199</sup> Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 120.

<sup>200</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Tyronic Dialogues — X. and F, 1922, in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 365-372 (p.369).

<sup>201</sup> Gordon, *Why the French*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>202</sup> Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin 1875-1910: Vernacular Modernity in France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 141.

<sup>203</sup> Charles Darwin qtd. in Gordon, *Dances with Darwin*, p. 141.

<sup>204</sup> Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', p. 151.

<sup>205</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'A Soldier of Humour', 1927, in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 17-46 (p. 30).

<sup>206</sup> Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', p. 151.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>208</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Bestre', 1927, in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 77-88 (pp. 77-79).

Jonathon Swift, whose remarkable magnifications of the body in *Gulliver's Travels* swell the flesh to monstrous proportions. Friedrich Kittler claims that Gulliver's description of the maid's monstrous breast suggests a 'microscopy built into nature'.<sup>209</sup> The description of Bestre's exterior combines a Swiftian microscopy of the obscene body with the entomological discourse used by the French naturalist Jean-Henri Fabre (to whom Lewis further alludes in 'Inferior Religions'<sup>210</sup> and *Snooty Baronet*).<sup>211</sup> The neologism 'ocellation' derives from *ocellus*, the Latin term for the basic ocular structures of many invertebrates. Ker-Orr's magnifying gaze implies the artificial extension of his vision via an optical prosthesis: it denaturalises the narrator's viewpoint and animalizes Bestre's 'wild body'. The 'artificial' eye reveals an 'animal' eye, which returns its gaze to form an assemblage of human/nonhuman perception. This composite of artificial and animal vision reflects the hybridisation of Bestre's body. Erik M. Bachmann notes that 'Bestre's body is made up of a curious mixture of mechanical and his eyes a mechanical pull but rather a "mechanical monkey-on-a-stick pull"'.<sup>212</sup> I would add that Bestre's artificial-animal life is reminiscent of 'Fabre's insiste[nce] on the mechanistic nature of insects as machines of inner repetition, unchanging in their predetermined nature'.<sup>213</sup> Lewis's indirect allusions to Fabre's account of the mechanical life of the insect testifies to his anxieties about the promotion of instinct above the intellect.<sup>214</sup> We are told, for instance, that Bestre 'has the anatomical instinct of the hymenopter for his prey's most morbid spot'.<sup>215</sup> For Lewis, philosophies which assert the pre-eminence of the corporeal over the mental are intent on manufacturing the 'becoming-insect' of the human. In *Time and Western Man*, Lewis attacks Bergson and his followers for viewing the human body in terms that recall Fabre's claims about the 'inner repetition' of the insect's mechanical life: 'Any human organism is essentially a repeating-machine, a habit-machine, a parrot of itself'.<sup>216</sup> Both the presence of Bestre's mechanical body and the optical device 'built in' to Ker-Orr's perception imply the ascendancy of an inhuman vision of technological 'life' over the claims of a primitivist investment in pre-technological purity. Indeed, Ker-Orr's encounter with the primitivist 'Other' is, in Bradley's phrase, '*technical all the way down*'.<sup>217</sup> At the same time, however, Bestre's technological body originates from a remote past that Lewis expresses in racial terms. According to Ker-Orr, Bestre

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<sup>209</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, trans. by Anthony Evans (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 92.

<sup>210</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Inferior Religions', 1917, in *The Complete WildBody*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 315-319 (p. 319).

<sup>211</sup> Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, p. 16.

<sup>212</sup> Erik M. Bachmann, 'How to Misbehave as a Behaviourist (if you're Wyndham Lewis)', *Textual Practice*, 23.3 (February 2013), 427-451 (p. 441).

<sup>213</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 22.

<sup>214</sup> Paul Edwards, 'The Death of the Ankou', *The Modern Language Review*, 92.1 (Jan 1997), pp. 22-35.

<sup>215</sup> Lewis, 'Bestre', p. 83.

<sup>216</sup> Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, p. 354.

<sup>217</sup> Bradley, p. 15.

‘carries on his face the mark of an origin even more distant than Picardy’.<sup>218</sup> While Bestre’s body blurs the distinction between nature and artifice which structures the ideology of modernist primitivism, his animal-artificial life is cast in terms of the animal body’s triumphant return to claim victory over consciousness. It seems that for Lewis the figure of the ‘primitive’ outlives its conditions of possibility.

It is noteworthy that technological media are central to Lewis’s ambivalent foray into modernist primitivism. The anarchic excess of physiological details in Ker-Orr’s portrait of Bestre generates intense visual fascination. Thus, it should not be surprising that Lewis’s essay ‘Inferior Religions’ (1917) asserts that photography a fitting analogue for his aesthetic vision of the ‘wild body’. Lewis contrasts the comic surface of life and social identity with the ‘the tragic corpse of Life underneath the world the Camera’.<sup>219</sup> While he associates tragedy with the spectral x-ray image of bones under the skin, Lewis claims that the comic has its home in visible ‘world of the Camera’.<sup>220</sup> Comic artists focus their energies on the surface of life in order to ‘photograph and fix’ its ephemeral patterns.<sup>221</sup> As Lewis puts it: ‘This futile, grotesque and sometimes pretty spawn, is what in [*The Wild Body*] is Kodacked [*sic*] by the imagination’.<sup>222</sup> The ‘world of the Camera’ that fixes the image of the body is distanced from the sensational immediacy of the body’s physical existence. In spite of Lewis’s focus on photography, however, the textual display of Bestre’s obscene and fleeting bodily presence seems to confirm Andrew Shail’s claim that the Wild Body stories are literary equivalents of the sensational forms of early cinema collectively known as the ‘cinema of attractions’.<sup>223</sup> According to Tom Gunning, cinematic ‘attractions have one basic temporality, that of the alteration of presence/absence that is embodied in the act of the display. In this intense form of present tense, the attraction is displayed with the immediacy of a “Here it is! Look at it!”’.<sup>224</sup> Citing Lewis’s claim that his puppets are ‘only shadows of energy, and not living beings’,<sup>225</sup> Shail argues that ‘the attractionist aesthetics of comedy provided fond models for’ his depictions of Breton peasants.<sup>226</sup> By bringing the cinematic parallels of the Wild Bodies to the fore, Shail’s comments let us see how technical media and atavistic bodies intertwine in these stories. I would add that the parallel between Ker-Orr’s prosthetic vision and Bestre’s multiform body showcases the non-representational image of cinema’s automatization of perception. Once again, I take the interplay between Bestre’s insect eye and Ker-Orr’s prosthetic vision to be

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<sup>218</sup> Lewis, ‘Bestre’, p. 81.

<sup>219</sup> Lewis, ‘Inferior Religions’, p. 318.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, p. 317.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, p. 318.

<sup>223</sup> Andrew Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 11-13.

<sup>224</sup> Tom Gunning, “‘Now you see it, now you don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions” in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, ed. by Peter Grieveson and Peter Kramer (London: Routledge, 2004), 41-50 (p. 44).

<sup>225</sup> Lewis, ‘Inferior Religions’, p. 316.

<sup>226</sup> Shail, p. 13.



revealing. Lewis's coinage 'ocellation' is a near-homophone of 'oscillation', which in this context could connote the fluctuating and ephemeral image of Bestre's multiform body. Paradoxically, it's hard to miss the absence/presence of the ephemeral in the metamorphoses of his monstrous carapace. Consider Ker-Orr's impression that Bestre's 'brown arms *were for the moment* genitals' (my italics).<sup>227</sup> If the term 'ocellation' connotes movement (oscillation) and a form of non-anthropocentric vision (*ocellus*), then perhaps we are seeing Bestre's body as if from within an assemblage of insect and cinematic modes of perception. If so, then Lewis may be suggesting that there is something archaic about the inhuman perceptual worlds of cinema. As Steven Shaviro suggests, '[c]inematic perception is primordial to the extent that it is monstrously prosthetic'.<sup>228</sup> Cinema 'crosses the threshold of a new kind of perception, one that is below or above the human. This new perception is multiple and anarchic, nonintentional and asubjective; it is no longer subordinated to the requirements of representation and idealization, recognition and designation'.<sup>229</sup> The nonhuman agency of the cinematic image lies in its ability to bypass cognition by 'thrusting us into the mysterious life of the body'.<sup>230</sup> If the portable Kodak camera of the imagination promises to fix the ephemeral in a permanent effigy of a single moment, the early cinematic apparatus turns the flux of the visible world into a transmitter of affective intensities and sensational forms of display.

### Atavistic Automata

Atavistic automata also feature in Lewis's closet drama *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), which stages 'repeated forced conjunctions of [the] archaic and [the] electric'.<sup>231</sup> Lewis's play conveys an image of the human body as a carnal machine animated by warring energies. When Lewis describes Arghol's body as an 'underworld of energy and rebellious muscles'<sup>232</sup>, or when he writes of 'Hanp's nerve of hatred, sending hysteria gyrating in top of diaphragm', he expresses the total dominion of mindless corporeality over rational personhood.<sup>233</sup> The implication of this triumph of automatic life over human agency is that the loss of self-mastery annuls individuality *tout court*. For Lewis, there can be no individuality worthy of the name without a clear-cut distinction between self and world. If Arghol's 'leaden inanimation' precedes his violent attack on Hanp, then this is because his thing-like inertia enables his *reanimation* by external forces: 'Arghol did not hit hard. Like something inanimate, only striking as rebound and as attacked. He became soft, blunt paw of Nature, taken back to her bosom, mechanically; slowly and idly

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<sup>227</sup> Lewis, 'Bestre', p. 79.

<sup>228</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, p. 258.

<sup>231</sup> Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 153.

<sup>232</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars' 1914, in *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. by Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1917), 93-120 (p. 109).

<sup>233</sup> Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars', p. 117.

winning. He became part of responsive landscape'.<sup>234</sup> It seems that for Lewis automatisms activate the immersion of the human within its extra-human surroundings. This loss of individual boundaries announces a collapse of transcendence into immanence; it also implies a fall into a material flux, whereupon the orders of the human, the animal, the vegetal, and the inorganic become indistinct.

This erosion of distinctions extends to the relationship between Lewis's protagonists. As Arghol exclaims to Hanp: 'I am amazed to find that you are like me'.<sup>235</sup> In fact, the conventional, all-too-familiar antinomies of the doppelgänger plot — the division between spirit and matter, the struggle of body and soul, the confrontation between self and other — provide the basis for the antagonisms of the play. These antinomies are embodied in the two protagonists: on the one hand, Arghol represents the human aspiration for spiritual transcendence of the corporeal drives; on the other hand, Hanp represents the bodily impulses that Arghol would repudiate. In *Enemy*, the double theme dramatizes not just the contamination of self and other, or mind and matter, but the destruction of the divide between conscious and unconscious actions. Rae Beth Gordon explains that Bergson's *Laughter* draws on the psychiatric research of the philosopher's day, particularly the idea of a 'radical division between the higher and lower faculties: reason, judgement, choice, and will as opposed to sensation, motor response, automatisms, and instinct'.<sup>236</sup> It should not be a surprise that Hanp exhibits all of these 'low' characteristics. It is noteworthy that his 'bourgeois aspirations' and resentment towards the intellectual Arghol align him with the urban masses.<sup>237</sup> The fact that Lewis identifies him with the instinctive life of animals implies his evolutionary regression. His automatisms are not merely comic in Bergson's sense but collectively emphasise the link between mechanical gestures and atavism. Hanp's mechanical body underwrites his backward orientation insofar as his automatism signifies the reappearance of primordial instincts within the mass life of the crowd. Gordon explains how automatisms were linked to the animal pre-history of the human species in the Darwinian context of late nineteenth-century medicine. Ernst Haeckel's theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny claimed that the development of the individual repeats the evolution of the species.<sup>238</sup> Since the lower faculties evolved earlier than rational thought, 'automatisms signal[led] evolutionary regression and degeneration'.<sup>239</sup> For Gustave Le Bon, when the monadic individual loses its distinctness and fuses with the formless life of the crowd '[h]e is no longer himself [*sic*], but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will'.<sup>240</sup> Lewis emphasizes not only the 'savage' violence that

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>236</sup> Gordon, *Why The French*, p. 13.

<sup>237</sup> Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars', p. 96.

<sup>238</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), p. 81.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, pp. 26-27.

<sup>240</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*, trans. by Robert A. Nye (Transaction: New Brunswick, 1995), p. 52.

springs from Hanp's automatism but the abject lowness of his body. Arghol's sense of 'contamination' arises from his feeling that '[t]oo many things inhabited together in this spirit for cleanliness or health'.<sup>241</sup> Lewis highlights the proximity of the urban crowd by comparing Arghol's inauthentic self to 'a doss-house', adding that it is 'impossible to organize on such a scale'.<sup>242</sup> *Enemy* is a play in which disorganized, unformed matter is legion: the landscape is awash with 'mire'<sup>243</sup> and 'filth'.<sup>244</sup> The formless waste is a material analogue of the disorganized humanity of the crowd. As Stefan Jonsson has put it: 'To define the masses as undifferentiated matter implies that they lack formation and individuation, and it also suggests that these masses are commanded by parts of the psyche that are universal, that is, by unconscious instincts and passions'.<sup>245</sup> Likewise, Lewis draws a connection between the shapelessness of non-individuated matter and the atavistic instincts of the crowd.

*Enemy* charts out two distinct types of atavism. As we have seen, the first is the normative version of atavism signified by the predominance of the 'lower faculties' that both Le Bon and Lewis attributed to the collective body of the crowd. This fin-de-siecle understanding of human reversion is noticeable in Arghol's description of Hanp as an 'unclean little beast'.<sup>246</sup> The second type of atavism is a more primeval or antediluvian form of retrogression which exceeds the degenerationist trope of bestialized humans. The play's extension of the logic of atavism conforms to some extent with Claire Colebrook's account of a radical atavism [...] where humans intuit rhythms that are distinct, inhuman, and beyond the time of the present'.<sup>247</sup> Such an atavism does not consist in 'a nostalgic return but an explosive atavism that then allows for an inhuman future — *not a post-human future, which would be man's capacity to think beyond himself, but a thought of a world without man that is released from the orbit of evolving time*'.<sup>248</sup>

In Lewis's play, the aggregation of the modern and the primordial creates a simultaneity of different times that are irreconcilable with linear evolving time. Hints of past and future extinctions abound: the names of familiar extinct species ('Mastodons') are juxtaposed with alien forms of raw, protoplasmic life ('immense bird-like amoeba'); the extinction of the human species is presaged as a '[c]ataclysm of premature decadence' that would leave behind 'no human'; and the geological movement of the 'slowly-moving lines [...]

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<sup>241</sup> Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars', p. 107.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>245</sup> Stefan Jonsson, 'Masses, Mind, Matter: Political Passions and Collective Violence in Post Imperial Austria' in *Representing the Passions: Histories, Bodies, Visions*, ed. by Richard Meyer (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 69-102 (p. 79).

<sup>246</sup> Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars', p. 109.

<sup>247</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction Vol 1* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 227,

[openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Colebrook\\_2014\\_Death-of-the-PostHuman.pdf](http://openhumanitiespress.org/books/download/Colebrook_2014_Death-of-the-PostHuman.pdf)

[Accessed January 2017]

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, p. 221.

of landscape' imply a time both beyond and before human consciousness.<sup>249</sup> Human identities recede behind a panorama of radically inhuman forms. Consider, for example, how Arghol becomes a craggy outcrop of the inorganic landscape: his 'hands [are] a thick shell fitting [the] back of [his] head, and [his] face [is a] grey vegetable cave'.<sup>250</sup> Neither human nor animal, Lewis's ossified protagonist blends into the mineral environment. As an assemblage of lithic and biological parts, Arghol is 'CENTRAL AS STONE' and 'LIES LIKE HUMAN STRATA OF INFERNAL BIOLOGIES'.<sup>251</sup> It is moreover significant that Arghol's lithic body is first introduced as part of a nonhuman creation myth: 'HE SITS LIKE A GOD BUILT BY AN ARCHITECTURAL STREAM, FECUNDED BY MAD BLASTS OF SUNLIGHT'.<sup>252</sup> Reversing the monotheistic notion of a divine creator god who fashions the material world, Arghol owes his origins to a confluence of nonhuman agencies. This mythic focus on creative primeval agencies finds its counterpart in the destructive animistic forces that erode stable identities. The landscape is alive with inhuman becomings: everything in it seems to be morphing, exceeding taxonomic categories, changing density, dissolving, shifting, or merging in flows of shapeless matter.

It would be a mistake to ascribe Lewis's negation of the organic and human form to a posthumanist affirmation of nonhuman agencies. Rather, Lewis's emphasis falls on the 'barbarous' energies released by the interrelation of the past and the present. In *Enemy*, his focus seems to be on the *inhuman* rather than the *posthuman*. As Colebrook and Weinstein have said, the inhuman does not come in the wake of the human but 'pushes us to scales beyond the human — temporalities and spatialities both deep and astronomical'.<sup>253</sup> At the same time, the inhuman can denote 'a lack of ostensibly human qualities of compassion and mercy as well as "cruelty, savageness, and barbarism."'.<sup>254</sup> The correlation between Hanp's atavistic 'crowd' behaviour and the 'radical atavism' of the landscape connects the human drama of the protagonists to the inhuman time of organic evolution and distant geological and astronomical forces. The modernity of the machine-age present denoted by Hanp's automatic violence is interrelated with the panoply of hostile agencies that both came before the human and threaten its organic survival. The point I want to underline is that this coalescence of the primordial and the technological involves a complex accretion of different bodies and temporalities. Lewis achieves this polychronic juxtaposition of the modern and the archaic through an intricate layering of the vocabulary of mass media and advertising ('THE BOX OFFICE RECEIPTS HAVE BEEN ENORMOUS') with recurring allusions to the deep time of evolution and

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<sup>249</sup> Lewis, 'Enemy of the Stars', p. 103.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, 'Introduction: Critical Life Studies and the Problems of Inhuman Rites and Posthumous Life' in *Posthumous Life: Theorising Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. by Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1-14 (p. 5).

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

geology.<sup>255</sup> Amid the anti-modern, ‘presudo-rustic’ landscape of elemental forces that record the traces of a time before the human, Lewis’s references to the media ecology of the machine-age produce a sense of radical temporal disjointedness.<sup>256</sup> The photographic ‘Morris-lens’<sup>257</sup> and the ‘telegraph’ suggest the attempt to extend human perception and communication beyond its ‘natural’ limits.<sup>258</sup> Yet this extension of the human body does nothing to reassert human sovereignty over the hostile agencies of the inhuman landscape. As we have seen, the stories later collected in *The Wild Body* demonstrate Lewis resistance to the primitivist idea of returning to a pristine or pure form of life uncontaminated by technology. What he foregrounds in *Enemy of the Stars* is that the emergence of machine-age technology does not extinguish ‘savage’ or primordial agencies. Rather, the primordial and the technological emerge as mutually reinforcing agencies that contaminate the individual and threaten its extinction. In Lewis’s drama, technology ceases to represent futurity and progressive linear time; instead, the machine is bound up with the deep time of fossilized remains and astronomical distances: ‘The stars shone madly in the archaic blank wilderness of the universe, machines of prey. Mastodons, placid in electric atmosphere, white rivers of power’.<sup>259</sup> This conflation of the machine with fossilized traces of pre-historic life (‘Mastodons’) and distant cosmic forces (‘stars’) diminishes the stature of the human. Indeed, within this nonhuman landscape, Arghol and Hanp appear to be ‘severe midgets, brain specks of the vertiginous, seismic, vertebrate, slowly-moving lines, of landscape’.<sup>260</sup> A sense of vast and inhuman remoteness links the geological time of the ‘slowly-moving [...] landscape’ to the ‘immensely distant’ stars, both of which suggest spatial and temporal distances that exceed the scale of the human. But the estrangement and remoteness of the inhuman is interlaced with signifiers of the familiar and the near-at-hand, such as the ‘English metropolis’<sup>261</sup> or ‘THE CORRIDORS OF THE TUBE’.<sup>262</sup>

Lewis continues his project of combining the metropolitan and the ‘barbarous’ in his novel *Tarr* (1918). Its opening passage self-consciously announces a distinction between its representation of the city and the milieu of the cinema: ‘We are not in a Selim of Vitagraph camp’.<sup>263</sup> Many scholars have argued that cinema’s emergence as a popular medium forged a new relationship between technology and life, for its reanimation of bodies and things seem to imply the machine’s vitalization of the inanimate — both in terms of its animation of ‘living pictures’ and its powers to revivify the bodies of the dead. As Deborah Levitt has put it:

In 1895, the first cinema cameras — the US Vitascope, the German Bioscope, and the English Animatograph — were produced and patented almost simultaneously. The

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<sup>255</sup> Lewis, ‘Enemy of the Stars’, p. 98.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>263</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr the 1918 version*, 1918, ed. by Paul O’Keefe (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1990), p.21

names of these new inventions made a powerful claim: the cinema will capture, or produce, life itself. But this cinematic mode of life is not confined to the movie theatre. The world of the twentieth century is shaped by the spectral-spectacular life/death of the cinematic image.<sup>264</sup>

The etymology of the word ‘Vitagraph’ pertains to Lewis’s fascination with the conflict between life (*vita*) and art/human making (*graph*). The fact that Lewis opposes the bohemian ‘Knackfus Quarter’ to the ‘Vitagraph camp’ suggests a desire to uphold the partition between the traditional arts and the cinema. This implies in turn a resistance to the threat of the new posed by cinematic technology. Nevertheless, Lewis is quick to reincorporate what he makes a show of rejecting, because in the following paragraph we find ‘a Vitagraph group or two drinking or playing billiards’ in the ‘the Café Berne’: ‘These [i.e. ‘the Vitagraph group’] are the most permanent tableaux of this place, disheartening and admonitory as a Tussaud’s of the flood’.<sup>265</sup> The comparison of cinematic spectators to the waxwork figures of Madame Tussaud’s introduces a central motif: the animate and the inanimate exchange properties, and even become indistinguishable. Indeed, this opening passage prefigures Lewis’s representation of Kreisler’s recurrent oscillations between life and nonlife.

It is noteworthy that Lewis compares these ossified spectators to ‘a Tussaud’s of *the flood*’ (my italics). Their ossification signals a kind of stagnation or inactivity that exists in the metropolis and yet also signals a return of to a time before modernity. The fact that Lewis describes the atavistic Kreisler as ‘a living cinematograph’ speaks to Lewis’s engagement with cinema’s reframing of life and death in terms of regression.<sup>266</sup> Len Platt has highlighted the narrative of racial decline that Lewis maps onto Kreisler’s physical deterioration.<sup>267</sup> He notes Lewis’s comic portrayal of the ‘biologically inefficient’ German’s failed attempts to adapt to cosmopolitan milieu of pre-war Paris.<sup>268</sup> In Platt’s view, the ‘mechanistic logic’ driving Kreisler’s ‘reduction’ to a primitive, anachronistic creature is ‘presumably the workings of a historical dynamic,’ and his bellicose eruptions are less displays of warlike masculinity than symptoms of racial degeneration.<sup>269</sup> With this intersection of race and degeneration the narrative arc of Kreisler’s decline turns in a biopolitical direction: he not only seethes with ‘racial menace’<sup>270</sup> but is also the embodiment of ‘a clumsy and degenerate atavism’.<sup>271</sup> In line with the *fin-de-siècle* theories of atavism expounded by Cesare Lombroso, Kreisler’s

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<sup>264</sup> Levitt, p. 6.

<sup>265</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 21.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>267</sup> Len Platt, ‘Germanism, the Modern and “England” 1880-1930: a literary overview’ in *Modernism and Race*, ed. by Len Platt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19-38 (pp. 25-26).

<sup>268</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>271</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 288.

degeneration seems to compel him to leave a trail of crime and destruction in his wake.<sup>272</sup> As we've already seen, Lewis frames evolutionary regression as the dominance of instinct over intellect; cast into the vortex of Paris, Kreisler, the 'effete machine,' becomes an inert machine moved by external forces.<sup>273</sup>

Lewis creates a temporal divide in which the modernity represented by the dynamism of the cinema and the metropolis is countered by a sense of reversion and a return to the inorganic. A possible source for Lewis's sense that the dynamism of the modern reawakens remote primordial forces is Wilhelm Worringer's influential dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), which captured the modernist imagination with its argument that abstract art has its origin in humanity's primordial fears about the chaotic flux of the external world. While Foster suggests that Lewis's engagement with Worringer's 'primordialism' provides the aesthetic basis for a grim affirmation of the inorganic and the death drive, I propose that Worringer's study provides a clue to Lewis's critique of the atavistic logic underpinning modernity's cult of novelty.<sup>274</sup> Worringer writes:

A convinced evolutionist might, [...] seek [geometric form] in the ultimate affinity between the morphological laws of organic and inorganic nature. He would then erect the ideal postulate that the morphological law of inorganic nature still echoes like a dim memory in our human organism. He would then perhaps also assert further that every differentiation of organised matter, every development of its most primitive form, is accompanied by a tension, by a longing to revert to this most primitive form.<sup>275</sup>

The memory of the inorganic that persists in organic forms links the most recent organisms to the remote past before the emergence of organic life. More than this, Worringer claims that 'every development' of life engenders 'a longing to revert to this most primitive form'. And he thus extends the idea of atavism further back in time than the history of organic evolution. Lewis in turn extends the notion that the development of the new causes a reappearance of the most primordial, ossified forms to include the development of technology. The emergence of the most dynamic technologies foster an anachronistic yearning for stasis and fixity. This would suggest that Kreisler's oscillation between animation and inanimation is an embodiment of the temporal divide between the dynamism of modern technology (including cinema) and the inertia of primordial inorganic forms.

Kreisler embodies the striking fusion of inertia and animation characteristic of the Lewisian body: while his inert body represents 'an unparalleled immobility in life', his atavistic outbursts also signal the release of primordial energies that produce chaos and destruction — both in terms of his violent actions towards others and his own hysterical disintegration and

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<sup>272</sup> For a discussion of the significance of atavism in *fine-de-siècle* degeneration theory see Esposito, *Bios*, p. 119.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>274</sup> Foster, p. 143.

<sup>275</sup> Worringer, qtd in Foster, pp. 142-143.

suicide.<sup>276</sup> When he undergoes a ‘nervous attack’ that leaves him ‘trembling violently’, we learn of the disorder that agitates his unmanageable flesh.<sup>277</sup> ‘He was almost annihilated,’ Lewis tells us, ‘by a terrific explosion’.<sup>278</sup> Characters become animated corpses or vivified objects exposed to ‘the arbitrary decisions of force’.<sup>279</sup> What is more, death exceeds its usual limits in order to contaminate life; we thus discover that Kreisler’s ‘nervous system was as quiescent as a corpse’s’ *before* his hapless duel with Louis Soltyk sets in motion the concatenation of events that result in his suicide.<sup>280</sup> Further, the sense of estrangement Lewis evokes by immobilising the human parallels his depiction of the agency of objects. Things behave like characters: their sudden animation mirrors the convulsive gestures of Lewis’s puppets. And this riot of objects signals in turn the vitalization of the inanimate, as indicated by the spectacle of Tarr’s ‘brushes, photographs and books flying over to their respective places on dressing table, mantelpiece, shelf or bibliothèque ; [or his] boxes and parcels creeping dog-like under beds and into corners’.<sup>281</sup> If the animation of objects suggests an anachronistic return of animistic modes of thought, then inert objects heighten the tensions between characters and animate their bodies with violent actions. Kreisler’s automatisms may render him thing-like but it is often objects in the ‘hostile external world’ which hasten his degeneration and awaken his bestial impulses. For example, the rustling of a woman’s skirt inflames his neurasthenic fear of outer sensations: ‘It seemed all around him, attacking him. The thin ordinary brushing of a skirt was like the low breathing of a hidden animal to a man in the forest. [...] The nerves on the side of his head twitched as though shrinking from a touch’.<sup>282</sup> In his inability to give order to his actions he becomes the textbook definition of the neurasthenic. As John Jervis explains: ‘The neurasthenic needs protection against the sensations and shocks of modernity. Above all, it reflected a weakness of *will* (‘*aboulia*’), which in turn testified to an inadequately strong ego, an inability to bind and direct energy towards clear goals’.<sup>283</sup> *Aboulia* raises the spectre of the complete privation of human energy, volition, and action; it hints at a condition of total inertia, which in effect would reduce the human body to lifeless matter. *Tarr*’s characters approach this frozen and will-less state. When Kreisler comes across a waiter ‘with a pink, virile face, which, in a spirit of fun, he kept constantly wooden and solemn’, Kreisler turns wooden himself and ‘[h]is mind [stands] stock still for several minutes’.<sup>284</sup> The waiter’s unmoving and affectless face induces Kreisler to become a mindless object: ‘This pink wooden face paralysed everything.

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<sup>276</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 164.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>283</sup> John Jervis, *Sensational Subjects: The Dramatization of Experience in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 58.

<sup>284</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 120.



[...] The more wooden it became, the more paralysed became Kreisler's intelligence'.<sup>285</sup> Without intelligence to guide his actions Kreisler becomes an inanimate object moved only by external forces. As *Tarr*'s most thing-like character, Kreisler gives the impression of being a hostile nonhuman *actant* immersed in a field of violent forces. In a sense, his 'deadness' and 'mechanical obstinacy' makes his movements seem like a kind of gothic animism — a reanimation of the nonliving.<sup>286</sup>

Kreisler's atavism and 'deadness' has political ramifications. If 'Our Wild Body' heaps scorn on the technological milieu that the young Lewis considered antagonistic to the vital impulses of the English body, *Tarr* expands this meditation of technology, life, and the national body to embrace the broader context of early twentieth-century Europe. In his study *Fables of Aggression* (1979), Fredric Jameson sets out his interpretation of *Tarr* as a 'national allegory'.<sup>287</sup> He proposes that the tensions between European nation-states preceding WWI 'constitute the very backdrop and organizational framework' of Lewis's narrative.<sup>288</sup> And indeed it is only against this pre-war backdrop of competing national types that we can make sense of *Tarr*'s harlequinade of international bohemians. One of the most striking features of the novel's crowd of dysfunctional characters is the significance of the body in their violent interactions. 'The body,' Tarr tells us, 'is the main thing'.<sup>289</sup> Just as Lewis inscribes his characters within a framework of national and racialized types, so he elaborates a symptomatology of the national body that makes use of the defining categories of modernist-era biopolitics: eugenics, efficiency, degeneration, atavism, and nervous exhaustion. Early in the novel Tarr tells his fellow Englishman Hobson that he represents 'the *dregs* of Anglo-Saxon civilization!'.<sup>290</sup> Tarr's scorn arises from his sense that Hobson's ersatz bohemianism masks the waning energies of England's cultural establishment. 'Any efficient State,' Tarr claims in mock-serious tones, 'would confiscate your property, burn your wardrobe, that old hat and the rest, as "*infecte*" and insanitary, and prohibit you from propagating'.<sup>291</sup> If Tarr's account of Hobson's lack of vitality conveys his animus towards England's dandified elite, he expresses his sexual desire according to a similar logic of racial fitness. One need only recall his racialized description of his German fiancée Bertha: 'She is a high standard Aryan female, in good condition, superbly made; of the succulent, obedient, clear peasant type'.<sup>292</sup> To consider these eugenicist and racializing vocabularies in relation to the interpersonal dynamics portrayed in *Tarr* is to identify the extent to which these biopolitical concerns enter into the very fabric of

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>287</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression* Wyndham Lewis, *the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 90.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 40.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

social interaction in the novel. In this regard, the most scathing portrait that Lewis sketches is of Kreisler's racialized German body. It is impossible to miss the hyperbolic extent to which he stresses Kreisler's 'Germanness'. Not only is he a former 'Korpsstudent'<sup>293</sup> with a 'German nature that craved discipline,'<sup>294</sup> but he even sees himself as an 'old berserker warrior'.<sup>295</sup>

I want to enquire into how the links between automata, atavism, and death that feature in Lewis's engagement with biopolitical questions about racial decline and national bodies. Gordon explains that circa 1900 'marionettes [were] a mirror for the phenomenon of automatisms'.<sup>296</sup> The figures of artificial life in modernist literature and early cinema represented pathological bodies: their jerky movements release wild surges of instinct or psychological disorders such as hysteria and epilepsy.<sup>297</sup> The pathological body is the flipside of Hal Foster's account of Lewis's technologically armoured body. It is the nervous or hysterical body, the body overwhelmed by sensations, the body plugged into networks of force and electricity, unable to find equilibrium or shield itself from the shock of the new. It is noteworthy that the Lewis's blurring of the distinction between life and death maps onto the conflicting symptoms of hysteria itself — which, according to John Jervis, include 'excess, volatility, hyperactivity, [and] convulsions', as well as 'withdrawal, passivity, exhaustion, [and] muteness'.<sup>298</sup> Nervous gestures dealt a blow to routine expectations about human agency. The fluid becoming of life fractured into discontinuous segments and the uncontrolled body exposed its mechanical reflexes.

While his atavism suggests a return to the uncivilized past, Kreisler's bestial behaviour seems to be a direct result of the twentieth-century mechanization of life. In striving for progress, technological modernity unwittingly engenders a new barbarism in the very heart of the metropolis. This association between technology and thanatos emerges in *Tarr* when artificial or mechanical motion impels Kreisler's violence. He is 'a machine, dead weight of old iron, that started, must go dashing on'.<sup>299</sup> The loss of conscious control that accompanies his technological animation links his automatism to evolutionary regression. As Max Nordau once put it: "As long as automatisms exist, one hasn't reached the 'purely human' [which] is judgement and will".<sup>300</sup> There is no evidence that Kreisler is able to control his impulses using his will or assess his actions using his judgement. Machines foster the dominance of mindless external force over the agency and control of the intellect, which reawakens in turn the primordial energies of aggression and violence. The fact that Kreisler likens 'himself to one of

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, p. 256.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, p. 267.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>296</sup> Gordon, *Dances*, p. 261.

<sup>297</sup> Gordon, *Why the French*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>298</sup> John Jervis, *Sympathetic Sentiments: Affect, Emotion and Spectacle in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 176.

<sup>299</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 107.

<sup>300</sup> Max Nordau in Gordon, *Dances*, p. 121.

those little steam toys that go straight ahead without stopping'<sup>301</sup> directly relates to the fact that 'instinct guide[s] his steps'.<sup>302</sup> Lewis employs the language of shock and neurasthenia in order to underscore Kreisler's helplessness in the face of the city's overwhelming sensations: his incorporation of the external forces of the metropolis becomes clear when we are told that '[b]lood came to his head with a shock'.<sup>303</sup> Further, while we learn that 'his energy was giving out' because of his 'immense personal neurasthenia', Kreisler's 'fatigue' is compatible with hyperbolic emotionality and sexual violence.<sup>304</sup> Gordon explains that that late nineteenth-century psychiatry proposed that the degenerate's 'hyper-excitability uses up a great deal of energy and diminished the ability to think, while at the same time, erotic ideas predominate. One sees that this portrait of the degenerate is easily at home in the context of the music-hall'.<sup>305</sup> Likewise, Kreisler's strained theatrics and 'clown-like' behaviour coalesce with his psychosexual mania.<sup>306</sup> His slapstick encounter with Anastasya at the Bonnington Club causes him to seethe 'in a hot riot of thoughts'.<sup>307</sup> Uncertain about how to proceed towards her, Kreisler veers from room to room in a turbulent state, 'foaming, fugitive, and confused'.<sup>308</sup> His fanatical confusion bespeaks his failure to gain control over his burgeoning sensations of anger and resentment.

Kreisler's animation often gives way to inertia. To be an inert thing is to lack any creativity or ability to change without the intervention of external forces. Lewis treats external animation as a malign agency which has the capacity to reduce humans to such lifelessness. The death drive of Lewis's most animated characters reveals the anti-vital threat of their 'automatic unconscious life'. This introduces us to the question of Lewis's residual vitalism: on one side, he denounces Bergson's influence on culture *ad nauseam*; on the other, his disapproval of technological animation is reminiscent of Bergson's critique of the 'cinematographical mechanism'. In the closing chapter of his *Creative Evolution*, 'The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and the Mechanistic Illusion', Bergson writes: 'In order that pictures may be animated, there must be movements somewhere. The movement does not exist here: it is in the apparatus'.<sup>309</sup> For Tom Gunning, this brief statement captures 'the core of Bergson's concern about the cinema: an artificial mechanical motion achieved through technology'.<sup>310</sup> Bergson's complaint against cinema comes down to his assertion that the moving images projected by the cinematograph receive their movement from outside or beyond

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<sup>301</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 117.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>309</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 1907, trans. by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover, 1998), p. 305.

<sup>310</sup> Tom Gunning, 'Animation and Alienation: Bergson's Critique of the Cinématographe and the Paradox of Mechanical Motion', *The Moving Image*, 14.1 (March 2014), 1-9 (pp. 5-6).

themselves (i.e. ‘in the apparatus’). While the vital becoming of life is immanent, technological movement originates outside that which it sets into motion. As Gunning explains, ‘[c]entral to this critique is Bergson’s deep suspicion of the machine, which also forms the basis of his analysis of laughter’.<sup>311</sup> This anti-technological perspective explains why Bergson derides the related categories of the artificial and the ready-made: ‘Consciousness’, he tells us ‘being in its turn formed on the intellect, sees clearly of the inner life only what is already made, and only feels confusedly the making’.<sup>312</sup> Summarising his efforts to describe the real as consonant with the ceaseless emergence of new forms, Bergson explains that ‘reality has appeared to us as perpetual becoming. It makes itself or it unmakes itself, but it is never something made’.<sup>313</sup> Consciousness interposes between the real movement of perpetual becoming and the artificial movement reconstructed by the mechanical operations of the intellect.

I want to consider Lewis’s engagement with the concepts of ‘life’ and ‘death’, and suggest that the distinction between these terms became uncertain in the context of the ‘parallel histories’ of literary modernism and early cinema.<sup>314</sup> While I will reflect on Lewis’s engagement with particular aspects of early cinema, the main focus here is to consider how cinema’s ‘transvaluation of life’ manifests itself in his fiction.<sup>315</sup> To that end, I chart how Lewis responds to the vexed entanglement of the living and the nonliving in the multimedia cultural field of the early twentieth-century. The technological life of the cinema also reframed the understanding of the human body. As the cinematic capture of movement involves mobilising static images, cinematic bodies are composites of mobility and immobility. ‘Cinematic bodies’, Levitt continues, ‘exist in a state of ontological crisis: Present or absent? Here or there? Living or dead?’.<sup>316</sup>

In her brilliant study, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2007), Laura Marcus draws a connection between early cinema’s love affair with ‘marionettes, puppets, automata, and mechanical figures’ and ‘the modernist and avant-gardist preoccupation with automatic life’.<sup>317</sup> Marcus notes that Lewis’s work ‘exhibited a fascination with “mechanical man”’.<sup>318</sup> What Lewis called the ‘automatic unconscious life’ of his Tyros, Apes, and Wild Bodies is exemplary in this regard.<sup>319</sup> While Marcus rightly pinpoints Lewis’s obsession with the mechanization of life, both of the senses of the word ‘automaton’ will be crucial to my discussion. Building on Marcus’s cogent remarks, I integrate my discussion of

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>312</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 273.

<sup>313</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 272.

<sup>314</sup> David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Maldon: Blackwell, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>315</sup> Louis-Georges Schwartz, ‘Cinema and the Meaning of “Life”’, *Discourse*, 28.2/3 (Spring and Fall 2006), 7-27 (p. 7).

<sup>316</sup> Levitt, p. 17.

<sup>317</sup> Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema and the Modernist Period* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 40.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid, p. 284.

<sup>319</sup> Lewis, ‘Tyronic Dialogues — X. and F’, p. 369.

Lewis's engagement with automatic life with a detailed reading of his portrayal of animated things. My analysis enquires into Lewis's response to the object-animation films produced by the Vitagraph Company between 1907 and 1910, and is in conversation with Brook Henkel's work on 'animated things in German modernist literature and film'.<sup>320</sup> As Henkel explains: 'Increasingly popular after 1905 yet largely disappearing before World War I, short films featuring animated furniture, utensils, tools, drawings, puppets, and personal items emerged as a particular and rather late instance of the cinema of attractions'.<sup>321</sup> Lewis's framing of animated objects and inert humans is closely tied to his engagement with early cinema in general and, I will argue, object-animation films in particular. Michael North has rightly pointed out that Lewis 'was a lifelong fan of movie cartoons'.<sup>322</sup> To support this claim he cites Lewis's testimony of his 'boundless admiration for [Walt] Disney'<sup>323</sup> in a letter composed in 1946 together with Lewis's description of anthropomorphic cabbages reading Flaubert in 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (1928).<sup>324</sup> But critics have not explored the relations between *Tarr*'s animated things and the Vitagraph trick-films he would have encountered in Paris or London between 1907 and 1910. The US Vitagraph Company 'had established Paris as its principle foreign office as early as 1906-7'.<sup>325</sup> It is significant for our purposes that '*The Haunted Hotel* (1907) was the first to have some impact'.<sup>326</sup>

*Tarr*'s other scenes of in/animation testify to the importance of this initial juxtaposition between frozen waxworks and the moving image. In a striking reanimation of the Pygmalion myth, Kreisler witnesses the enlivening of a modern-day Galatea in a life drawing class: 'the Model slowly and rhythmically abandoned her rigid attitude, coming to life as living statues do in ballets'.<sup>327</sup> As Scott Bukatman reminds us, 'some of the earliest films were of artists' models coming miraculously (and harmlessly) to life'.<sup>328</sup> But while the Pygmalion story puts the vivifying powers of the male artist centre stage, Kreisler is 'just as torpid' as this Parisian Galatea and the 'mechanical students' manufacturing mimetic reproductions of her body.<sup>329</sup> If Pygmalionism allegorizes the erotic attachments provoked by mimetic art, Lewis proposes a counter-Pygmalionism that associates sudden animation with mechanistic repetition and the becoming-inert of the living body.

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<sup>320</sup> Brook Henkel, 'Animistic Fictions: German Modernism, Film, and the Animation of Things' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013), p. 23.

<sup>321</sup> Brook Henkel, 'Kafka's Animations', *New German Critique*, 45.2 (August 2018), 67-98 (p. 67).

<sup>322</sup> North, p. 113.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' in *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 155-160 (pp. 158-159).

<sup>325</sup> Richard Abel, *The Ciné goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 42.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>328</sup> Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 141.

<sup>329</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, pp. 117-118.

This returns us to a fundamental paradox: in *Tarr*, as in *Enemy of the Stars*, the animation of the body becomes indistinguishable from a deadening mechanical force. *Tarr*'s characters show intensified states of animation when they behave less like persons and more like machines. The violent animation of their mechanical bodies parallels Lewis's portrayal of hostile objects imbued with uncanny powers. How fitting, then, that Kreisler's assistant in his duel, Bitzenko, is 'restored to silent and intense animation on hearing his "Browning" speak'.<sup>330</sup> On the morning of the fatal duel, Bitzenko's frenzied activity derives from nothing but the levers and pulleys of an alarm clock: 'the Russian, already on his feet, his white and hairy body had apparently risen energetically out of the scratch bed clothes simultaneously with the "going of" of his clock, as though it were a mechanism set for the same hour'.<sup>331</sup> The ringing of this alarm leaves Kreisler 'almost annihilated by a terrific explosion'.<sup>332</sup> The external motion or animation produced by this fixed mechanism conspires against organic life. Kreisler's capitulation to external forces strips him of his vitality and his 'instinctive resistance to the idea of Death'.<sup>333</sup> He is a living corpse 'rendered empty by his premature insensitiveness'.<sup>334</sup> His inelasticity, furthermore, moves him mechanically towards his predetermined goal of turning his rival into a 'disintegrating mess, uglier than any vitriol or syphilis could make him'.<sup>335</sup> Kreisler's body becomes a nonliving vessel possessed by mechanical animation, completely deprived of human agency. In the hilarious prelude to the duel that never takes place, Solytk loses control of his animated body. We find him 'writhing upright, a statue's bronze softening, suddenly, with blood'.<sup>336</sup> This sudden enlivening of his inanimate flesh sets in motion the events that result in his death. 'His hands were electrified. Will was at last dashed all over him, an arctic douche. The hands flew at Kreisler's throat. His nails made six holes in the flesh and cut into the tendons beneath. Kreisler was hurled about'.<sup>337</sup> This uncontrolled attack and Solytk's subsequent retreat goads Kreisler into seizing the gun that will end Solytk's life.

Lewis's fiction does not petrify or de-vitalise human figures so much as turn characters into objects in order to animate them with inhuman forces, which explains why his characters repeatedly fall short of the categories of 'subject' or 'person'. Without denying the thing-like condition of *Tarr*'s bodies, one might argue that the extent of their reification directly correlates with the intensity of their animation. On such a reading, then, it is the very thingness of *Tarr*'s bodies that produces their restless dynamism. Throughout the novel there is an overriding sense that inorganic matter is just as 'alive' as its organic counterpart. In her study *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson describes the 'nightmare' scenario in which 'suddenly what was an

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid, p. 267.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, p. 266.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, p. 269.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, p. 270.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

object becomes a subject whose gaze turns us into an object and who escapes our control'.<sup>338</sup> In *Tarr*, such exchanges between subjects and objects generate uncertainty as to whether affects originate 'inside' a character's mind or traverse between humans and things: 'Nausea glared at [Kreisler] from every object he met'.<sup>339</sup> Is this nausea fully attributable to Kreisler's phobic subjectivity? Or do the objects he encounters gaze back at him with disgust? I take it that this extension of affect to the inorganic world erases the divide between the enlivening passions of humans and the passionless materiality of things. After all, the fact that Tarr recoils from the excessive animation of both objects and subjects suggests that he does not draw a clear-cut distinction between humans and things. Lewis's animus takes aim at mindless animation in general, whether it arises in persons or objects. Indeed, Tarr's reasons for disliking his vivified possessions are identical to his reasons for disliking other characters. A self-described 'panurgic pessimist', he finds the 'unwearied optimism of these inanimate objects [...] appalling'.<sup>340</sup> It is surely no accident that his animus against objects recalls his contempt for Hobson's optimistic liberal faith that 'all's well with the world!'.<sup>341</sup> For the antagonistic Tarr, the banal optimism of both animated things and reified persons cannot go unchallenged.

If *Tarr's* objects can transgress the modern ban on lively or agential matter, the animation of the inanimate also serves to diminish Tarr's charismatic individualism. For Tarr, the lawless forces that animate objects are a threat to his creative agency; after moving to a new studio, he frets and fusses about unpacking his belongings: 'To undo and let loose upon the room his portmanteau's squashed and dishevelled contents — like a flock of birds, brushes, photographs and books flying over to their respective places on dressing table, mantelpiece, shelf or bibliothèque ; boxes and parcels creeping dog-like under beds and into corners, taxed his character to breaking point'.<sup>342</sup> This is a world of impersonal energies in which the inorganic pulses with a 'life' of its own, where objects disrupt human action and 'tax' the very idea of 'character' to 'breaking point'. Further, Tarr's 'breaking point' refers not so much to psychic disintegration as to his own fragile objectness. It is wonderfully ironic that the tools of his creativity ('brushes') cause him 'discomfort' and 'a *bristling* host of incertitudes', since this emphasises the imposture underlying his sense of being a Nietzschean artist-superman.<sup>343</sup> Tarr's '*bristling*' anxiety makes him into a *doppelgänger* of his animate brush. I want to suggest that this scene bears an uncanny resemblance to the object-animation films Lewis would have seen in Paris. One of the most striking of these films, *Electric Hotel* (1908), features a portmanteau opening autonomously to release its animated contents. Some brushes, a comb, and various items of clothing endowed with life remove themselves from the luggage and put

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<sup>338</sup> Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>339</sup> Lewis, *Tarr*, p. 207.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

themselves away in the hotel room dresser. Insofar as these animate objects pose a challenge to Tarr's 'possession' of the studio they allegorize the threat that cinematic life poses to the art of painting.<sup>344</sup> This explains why he seeks to reassert his human agency over the inanimate by 'start[ing] work at once'.<sup>345</sup> Yet Lewis hints at the failure of Tarr's coping strategy; his hurried start is more of a false-start, for 'half an hour after taking possession [of the studio], it already being time for his apéritif, he issued forth' from his studio into the street.<sup>346</sup> Outside his new room he encounters 'a few clusters of men. The Spanish men dancers were coloured earth-objects, full of basking and frisking instincts'.<sup>347</sup> Needless to say, the implicit inertia suggested by their 'basking' instincts contrasts with uncanny mobility of Tarr's belongings 'flying to their respective places' in his room. This clear disparity is no doubt a literary equivalent of 'the respective lifelessness of humans in object-animation films'.<sup>348</sup> And yet, their 'frisking' instincts (and the fact they are dancers) suggest they represent the presence of both animation and inertia. Indeed, presenting their bodies as 'earth-objects' containing 'frisking' and 'basking' instincts returns us to the aporia of cinematic animation in general and the object-animation film in particular.

### **The Reversibility of 'Man'**

By the end of the 1920s, Lewis had reinforced his reputation as modernism's most incendiary literary satirist. In *Men Without Art* (1934), he argues that satire aspires to depict the general rather than the particular in human existence, focussing its wide-angle lens on the human-as-species: "It is with man, and not with manners, that what we have agreed to describe as 'satire' is called upon to deal".<sup>349</sup> According to Tyrus Miller, Lewis's "new anthropological focus results from a disruption in the fundamental character of historicity, which has become fully planetary and hence a *human* condition and no longer a national or racial one".<sup>350</sup> As Lewis (somewhat portentously) puts it: "'Period' will not be entirely ruled out, doubtless: only in the future it will be *world-period*. The habit of thought of this nation or that, at a given moment of its discrete history, will sink into the insignificance it deserves".<sup>351</sup> It was in this context that Lewis announced the emergence of a new world order that extends across national boundaries: "the Earth has become *one* place," he claimed in 1929, "instead of a romantic tribal patchwork of places".<sup>352</sup> Following Miller's remarks concerning Lewis's sense of the "disruption" of

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid, p. 205.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Henkel, 'Animistic Fictions', p. 143.

<sup>349</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, 1934, ed. by Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), p. 101.

<sup>350</sup> Tyrus Miller, 'Mimesis of the New Man: The 1930s from Ideology to Anthropolitics', *Encounters with the 1930s* (Madrid: La Fabrica/Museo Reina Sofia, 2012) 89-95 (p. 90).

<sup>351</sup> Lewis, *Men Without Art*, p. 102.

<sup>352</sup> Lewis qtd. in Richard Humphreys, 'Lewis as Visual Artist' in *The Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis*, ed. by Tyrus Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 44-60 (p. 56).



historicity in the post-war period, I want to suggest that we can detect this weakening of national periodicity in the shift from the international concerns of *Tarr* to his exploration of the human-as-species in *The Childermass*. But if *The Childermass* constitutes an example of the “new anthropological focus” that Miller detects in Lewis’s “late modernist” project, it also challenges anthropological coherence by dismantling stable notions of human identity. As we will see, for Lewis the mass deadness unleashed by technological animation alters our conception of the human: in an age of mechanized life, the career of ‘Western Man’ reaches its historical terminus.

In his wide-ranging polemic *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis argues — with barely concealed anxiety — that the political revolutions of the early twentieth century want to bring about a transformation of the human species:

I can very briefly offer an interpretation of the great cluster of movements disrupting our time. The first thing to notice about this is its implacableness, inasmuch as no success will satisfy it. It is not any personality, nation, or even particular ruling class which is aimed at, but an entire human revaluation. That is, of course, why it is more like a religion than a rebellion. It is as though a mind had placed itself over against the world and formed the resolve to reconstitute the human idea itself. It is the whole of humanity this time that is at stake.<sup>353</sup>

According to Miller, Lewis’s account of the political revaluation of the human ‘expresses his sense that nothing less than a species revolution, a fundamental change in human nature, was underway’ in the aftermath of WWI.<sup>354</sup> *The Childermass* gives bodily form to this ‘reconstitution’ of the human. Lewis’s text distorts human body beyond recognition, shaping it into forms that deviate from any identifiable ‘canon’ of the human.<sup>355</sup> Thus, the body is the ‘thing’ through which he conveys the historical endgame of the anthropocentric conception of ‘Man’. For Lewis, the anthropocentric idea of the human subject is incompatible with the historical developments in science, technology, media, and politics associated with the rise of democratic modernity. While he wanted to commence a cultural revolution that would reinstate the sovereign thinking subject and create a new order for ‘Western Man’, Lewis’s fiction underlines the dissolution of this anthropocentric vision of the human for satirical purposes. What emerges from the pages of Lewis’s satire is a veritable onslaught of ridicule, invariably directed towards those categories and dispositions that have traditionally acted as placeholders of human exceptionalism: character, sentiment, interiority, desire.

It is in *The Childermass* that Lewis most forcefully dramatizes the afterlife of the human subject. As Scott W. Klein has put it: ‘*The Childermass* [...] questions whether the received Enlightenment idea of man is sufficient to explain social organisation in the age of

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<sup>353</sup> Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, p. 76.

<sup>354</sup> Tyrus Miller, ‘Introduction: Janus-Faced Lewis, Avant Gardist and Satirist’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-18 (p. 10).

<sup>355</sup> Lewis, *The Childermass*, p. 227.

world wars'.<sup>356</sup> I would add that *The Childermass* explores the comedic — and horrific — consequences of inhabiting a cosmos without ontological hierarchies while remaining invested in the privileged status of human subjectivity. It is in this novel's fleshy yet curiously disembodied figures, I want to suggest, that Lewis most provocatively gives form to the reconstitution of the human form in a world without subjectivity. Set in the afterlife, Lewis's 'theological science fiction'<sup>357</sup> can be conceived in terms of a pun uttered by one of its principle characters, the demagogic Bailiff: 'Heaven is [...] a system of orthodox posthumous — if you will excuse the pun, post-human life'.<sup>358</sup> In connecting the 'posthumous' and the 'post-human,' Lewis's modernist fantasia creates a sense of human endings: an afterlife where narrative persists despite the dismantling of stable identities, the dislocation of bodies, the fragmentation of space, and above all the unmooring of time itself. The first half of the novel tracks the posthumous careers of two former school friends; a writer named Pullman ('Pulley') and an overgrown adolescent called Satterthwaite ('Satters'). Initially, their struggle to adapt to the conditions of 'post-human life' is a matter of learning how to re-inhabit their bodies. The intellectual Pulley adapts to the hallucinatory flux of the afterlife with relative success, hence his body is characterised by self-discipline: 'Its nerves are beneath its own orders'.<sup>359</sup> Conversely, spasms and other unintentional movements wrack the body of the infantile Satters: 'The usual typhonic symptoms continue. The front of the thick-set trunk is flung up and down in abrupt jumps, eructating with the fierce clockwork spasms of a dog with chorea'.<sup>360</sup> It is important to note that these bodily convulsions not only express Satters's physical discomposure; they also, and above all, situate the narrative in identifiable historical time. For whilst the strange autonomy of body parts in the novel contributes to a general condition of corporeal dislocation, the 'shell-shock wobble' of Satters's precarious gait reminds us that this condition should be read with reference to World War One.<sup>361</sup> Lewis situates the novel's abstract world in historical time even as he withholds the *mise-en-scène* of a recognisable post-war reality. Notice how fiercely he refuses any image of an entire, harmonious body when he reduces the corporeal frame to the 'trunks and thighs of human figures' or 'torsos moving with bemused slowness'.<sup>362</sup> Lewis's satirical gaze thus dismembers and distorts the post-war male body: his is a sundering of corporeal unity that mirrors the breaking apart of coherent masculine selfhood.

This 'post-human' fragmentation of the male body involves the reappearance of 'pre-human' forms of life. As the pair embark on a journey towards the 'Magnetic City', their

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<sup>356</sup> Scott, W. Klein, 'The Human Age' in *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Andrzej Gąsiorek and Nathan Waddell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015) 189-202 (p. 192).

<sup>357</sup> Jameson, p. 52.

<sup>358</sup> Lewis, *The Childermass*, p. 139.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

progress is held back by an insistent and pervasive return of the animal in the form of bodily metamorphoses. At a certain point, Satters ‘crashes *backwards*: a prolonged mournful braying breaks out. Elbows and knees on high, he lies like a capsized quadruped, his face stamped out by his heavily planted paws’ (my italics).<sup>363</sup> His backward falls signal not just falls into animality but the negation of well-defined form: he is ‘forced away backwards, sagging and open-mouthed’.<sup>364</sup> Pulley and Satters frequently have no control over the form or composure of their bodies. Their animated corpses recurrently morph shape, size, gender, and species. As in Gustave Flaubert’s parade of monstrous beings in his *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (one of the main influences on Lewis’s text), chimerical figures fuse human and animal parts and thereby blur the distinction between fantasy and reality. The shape of their bodies responds to the animating forces of passion and desire, the uncontrolled feelings that convulse the flesh and discompose it. Pullman reflects upon the idea that excessive passion animalises the human body: ‘How dreadfully vulgar human beings can be made by all the passions [...] They let themselves go, and presto they become the coarse animal girding away on the ground at our side’.<sup>365</sup> In Lewis satirical takedown of Bergson, the ascendancy of uncontrolled affects over self-restraint signifies the predominance of instinct over intelligence. As Jussi Parikka notes, ‘Bergson insisted on seeing the mode of instinct not merely as an automated response a primitive animal (such as an insect) gives to a stimulus but in addition “discernment and attunement” to the animal’s environment’.<sup>366</sup> In *The Childermass*, animal metamorphoses arise when Satters loses control of his passions: he becomes ‘an animal chaos, heaving and melting, restlessly adjusting himself to the tumpy uncompromising earth, thrusting up into him the sharp edges of its minerals’.<sup>367</sup> Here, Satters collapse from the upright posture becomes a satirical dramatization of a Bergsonian ‘attunement’ to the contours of the environment. Bergsonian intuition is rewritten as a monstrous animalization of the human.

*The Childermass* swarms with insect becomings: a ‘crawling energy’<sup>368</sup> disturbs Satters’s body; his ‘[t]hick-tongued voice buzzes’ like a fly;<sup>369</sup> and he also ‘contorts himself, establishing a vermiform rhythm between neck and waist’.<sup>370</sup> As Parikka notes, ‘metamorphosis marks for the majority of us a defining feature of “insect life”: transformation, development, and change’.<sup>371</sup> Likewise, the protean fluidity of the pseudo-couple’s bodies — their switches between genders, their alterations in size and shape, their rapid shifts between youth and senescence — suggests a larval condition of metamorphosis. In marked contrast to

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>366</sup> Parikka, *Insect Media*, p. 20.

<sup>367</sup> Lewis, *Childermass*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>371</sup> Parikka, *Insect Media*, p. 85.

Bergson's work, the transformational agencies that change the form of their larval bodies do not express the creative potential of life. If Bergson thought that 'the past is the condition of every future', then Lewis insisted that a future dependent on the past would inevitably be fixed and inert.<sup>372</sup> For Bergson, 'duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new'.<sup>373</sup> The metamorphoses of the ever-changing body performs the distortion of the human in a world that without moorings. Thus Pullman, ostensibly a more masculine figure than Satters, becomes "Miss Pullman",<sup>374</sup> "Nurse Pullman",<sup>375</sup> or even "a tart smart little governess".<sup>376</sup> This is perhaps a pastiche of Leopold Bloom's gender switching in James Joyce's *Ulysses*; but it is also possible to account for such appellations within the "masculinist" parameters of Lewis's critical agenda in the 1920s, particularly his misogynistic, one-dimensional remarks concerning "feminisation".<sup>377</sup> In any case, Lewis's most striking statement about gender is pertinent to the question of regressive technology. In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis argues that masculine identity is contingent and always at risk of collapsing:

Men were only made into "men" with great difficulty even in primitive society: the male is not naturally "a man" any more than the woman. He has to be propped up into that position with some ingenuity, and is always likely to collapse [...] A man, then, is made, not born: and he is made, of course, with very great difficulty.<sup>378</sup>

He goes on to write that as 'active, erect, humane creatures [men] are in a constantly false position, and behaving in an abnormal way. They have to be pushed up to it [...] and at the first real opportunity they collapse and are full length once more'.<sup>379</sup> Masculinity, in this anti-essentialist account, is no more than a regimen of bodily discipline and cultural habit. As Victor Barac observes, the collapsibility of the male body Lewis describes in *The Art of Being Ruled* relates to debates about the "bio-cultural" determinants of bipedalism, "an important theme in the anthropological study of human evolution".<sup>380</sup> What is significant here is that Lewis attributes the upright gait of the species to cultural training rather than biological instinct; in doing so, he suggests that the vertical posture of the human is prey to the contingencies of social existence.<sup>381</sup> The fact that Lewis presents masculinity as a technological contrivance that requires continuous effort to maintain seems to contradict his emphasis on technological

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<sup>372</sup> Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, p. 184.

<sup>373</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 11.

<sup>374</sup> Lewis, *The Childermass*, p. 26.

<sup>375</sup> Lewis, *The Childermass*, p. 49.

<sup>376</sup> Lewis, *The Childermass*, p. 16.

<sup>377</sup> Wyndham Lewis, 'The Foxes' Case' in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 120-136 (p. 128).

<sup>378</sup> Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, p. 247-248.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>380</sup> Victor Barac, 'The Cultural Theories of T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis', in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, ed. by Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 185-200 (p. 194).

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

backwardness and ossification. However, the point I want to emphasize is that Lewis's understanding of masculinity suggests that maintaining manhood requires continual exertion. Lewis phallic image of the 'erect' human suggests that uprightness is a product of forceful and strenuous activity. There is a masculinist vitalism underlying Lewis's theory of gender which relegates femininity to the status of inert matter. As a result, his theory does not imply a linear movement from the horizontal to the vertical that remains stable and fixed; instead, he conceives of the rectitude of 'Man' as a reversible process. While the productive and energetic force required to 'prop up' the male suggests a form of gendered artifice, the threat of waning of productive and energetic life would entail an unmaking of male identity. In *The Childermass*, Lewis draws a connection between reversible masculinity and the reversibility of the machine. Notice for instance that Pulley makes a connection between their backward-facing orientation and mechanical reversibility: 'Reversibility is the proof that the stage of perfection has been reached in machine-construction — it's the same with us, in my opinion. Here we are going backwards aren't we?'<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Lewis, *Childermass*, pp. 121-122.

## CHAPTER TWO: MINA LOY: ATAVISM AND THE POSTHUMAN

### Introduction: Two Birth Scenes of the Modernist Body

In this chapter I focus on the question of Mina Loy's vitalism and how her treatment of life relates to contemporary posthumanist thought. I begin with an enquiry into Loy's depictions of nonstandard bodies, and ask if they amount to a counter-normative critique of the regulated body of biopolitical modernity or, conversely, whether they are examples of the discourse of eugenic modernism. I consider how Loy's 'anarcho-maternalist' feminism of the 1910s informs her presentation of the de-animated life of impaired bodies and how this in turn relates to her critique of Futurist biopolitics in general and the technological body in F. T. Marinetti's futurist texts in particular.<sup>383</sup> Next I evaluate the extent to which posthumanist theories of life are applicable to the work of modernist vitalists who engage with eugenicist aspirations for bodily improvement. This leads me to question the conclusions recently drawn by critics about the extent to which Loy's modernism challenges retrograde attitudes to the anti-normative body. In addition, I address the limits of posthumanist theories of life that repeat the modernist inclination to present vitalism as a utopian democratic project that promises to perfect human life and achieve equality. My proposal is that we should be wary of this redemptive reading of life when examining modernist texts, especially when issues surrounding the representation of non-normative bodies are at stake. As Joseph Valente has recently asserted, '[t]he image of disability in modernist literature is a highly mediated effect of the development of the regime of biopower over the course of the nineteenth century'.<sup>384</sup> For this reason, modernist depictions of nonstandard bodies can work to undermine the democratic promise of political vitalism. The second section of this chapter studies Loy's radical vision of the anomalous body in her novel *Insel* in order to consider her engagement with two different strains of the monstrous, and proposes that it contains a critique of the organicist affirmation of life found in her early work.

I want to begin with two very different scenes of modernist parturition. The first occurs in Marinetti's 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism' (1909), an inaugural document of the modernist avant-garde that holds a privileged place in influential scholarly accounts of modernism and the body. In Hal Foster's *Prosthetic Gods* (2004)—his sweeping survey of the modernist body—the birthing of the futurist body occurs as a watershed moment in the history of modernism.<sup>385</sup> Futurism's founding statement declares the birth of the modernist body in all its hardened, 'posthuman' glory — at least this is the impression that emerges from Marinetti's

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<sup>383</sup> For a discussion of 'anarcho-maternalism' in the work of Mina Loy see Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology and Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 148-194.

<sup>384</sup> Valente, p. 380.

<sup>385</sup> Foster, 'Prosthetic Gods' in *Prosthetic Gods* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 109-150.

programmatic claims in the manifesto. In order to sketch out an alternative history of the modernist body, however, I want to draw attention to another birth scene; it occurs in Mina Loy's 1914 poem 'Parturition'. Unlike the futurist manifesto this poem is not concerned with the coming to light of a new and invulnerable body. Rather, the focus of Loy's poem is the maternal body: the processual, vulnerable body that exceeds its own boundaries and opens out towards birth, generation and life—but also towards otherness, decay and death. There is no mention in 'Parturition' of modern technology or the arrival of a posthuman future: nonetheless, in Loy's poem the body of maternity is equally a body of *modernity*. Here, too, is a scene in which modernist self-making takes the form of fashioning a body in language.<sup>386</sup> As we shall see, Marinetti and Loy also share a modernist investment in eugenicist notions of bodily improvement. Setting these two scenes of parturition besides one another allows for a reduplication of the birth of the modernist body that raises questions about origins and, more to the point, de-familiarises existing narratives about how modernism's bodies took on their particular contours and dimensions.

Futurism's scene of parturition does not take place amidst doctors and swaddling bands, and there is strictly speaking neither father nor mother present at the birth; instead, it is technological modernity itself which delivers up the prosthetic body of modernism. As Peter Nicholls has put it:

Where the decadents had been mesmerised by endings and by the miserable plight of the last scion, the Futurists know only those beginnings in which the self emerges new-born, without father, mother, past. The triumph of the mechanical over the natural thus encapsulates the capacity of the modern subject to experience himself as pure origin, as uncontaminated by tradition.<sup>387</sup>

Responding to a moment when the relations of machine and organism, or the artificial and the natural, were undergoing radical transformation, Marinetti chose to affirm the mechanisation of biological life with zealous enthusiasm. In the Futurist manifesto, Marinetti narrates a scene of technological parturition in which the maternal body is presented as abject biological matter that is superseded by male parthenogenesis:

O maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the black breast of my Sudanese nurse... When I came up—torn, filthy, and stinking—from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!<sup>388</sup>

This scene of rebirth marks a transition from nature to culture, from biology to technology; the memory of the nurse's breast is replaced in the present by the mechanical womb of the 'capsized

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<sup>386</sup> Virginia M. Kouidis, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 40.

<sup>387</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1995), pp. 85-86.

<sup>388</sup> F. T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', 1909, in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. by Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 249-256 (p. 250).

car', from which the new prosthetic body of modernism issues in a rapturous state of exaltation, 'the white-hot iron of joy' as Marinetti puts it.

Marinetti's antipathy to female reproduction expresses itself most hyperbolically in his 1909 novel, *Mafarka the Futurist*—a copy of which he promised to send to Loy at the outset of their affair.<sup>389</sup> The climax of the narrative is Mafarka's construction of his own son, a futurist rehashing of the myth of male autogenesis, connoting the usurpation of female reproduction by male artistry.<sup>390</sup> Throughout Marinetti's pre-war writing, he identifies the dichotomy of male and female with the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter.<sup>391</sup> By usurping nature's capacity for bestowing form, futurist *techne* reshapes feminised nature in its own masculine image. As Alex Goody has put it, the male futurist body is 'technologically hardened'—once reinforced by technical prostheses, the stability of its masculine form is guaranteed.<sup>392</sup> Marinetti, on the other hand, debars women from the form-giving capacity of technics. Women are repeatedly depicted as formless matter: their shapeless bodies tending towards the decay of the rotting corpse, as indicated by the description of Mafarka's brother's fiancé as 'scarlet pulp'.<sup>393</sup>

Marinetti contended that the future of Italy depended on a renewal of the national body.<sup>394</sup> The fantasy of the mechanical child is a pivotal element of the narrative of *Mafarka the Futurist* because it solves the 'problem' of imagining futurity in a world without women.<sup>395</sup> Technological birth not only excludes the female element from the body politic but makes biological inheritance obsolete. Mafarka weaves Futurist misogyny into the fabric of eugenics and Italian nationalism by proudly declaring that his 'son' Gazourmah is 'handsome, and free of all the blemishes that come from the inefficient vulva and bias us to old age and death'.<sup>396</sup> Mafarka's scion is a *sui generis* creation: Gazourmah's constructed body, carved out of wood, definitively breaks with biological heredity. One of Marinetti's intentions in *Mafarka the Futurist*—a polemical aim which it shares with 'The Futurist Manifesto'—is to construct an allegory of modernization in which fashioning a new body inaugurates a virile future. Thus, Mafarka's monstrous child symbolises new vistas of modernity: the regeneration of the (Italian) body politic redistributes the limits of nature and technology. In short, Mafarka grafts together his posthuman son in order to create an invulnerable body.

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<sup>389</sup> Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996), p. 154.

<sup>390</sup> F. T. Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel*, trans. by Carole Diethe and Steve Cox (London: Middlesex University Press, 1997), p. 185.

<sup>391</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 54.

<sup>392</sup> Alex Goody, *Technology, Literature, and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 141.

<sup>393</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 113.

<sup>394</sup> Roger Griffin, 'The Multiplication of Man: Futurism's Technolatry Viewed through the Lens of Modernism' in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, ed. by Günter Berghaus (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 77-100 (p. 91).

<sup>395</sup> Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, p. 56.

<sup>396</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 188.



Evan Mauro has sketched out the biopolitical significance of the Futurist myth of rebirth.<sup>397</sup> *Mafarka* conducts a biopolitical project in narrative form, both in terms of Marinetti's vision of the inviolable body of the mechanical son and his showcasing of the mass death of the depersonalized colonial other.<sup>398</sup> With reference to Achille Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics', Mauro argues that the life of Futurist Man depends upon mass death in the colonial space of Marinetti's orientalist version of Africa:

At work in this contrast between Gazourmah's regeneration and an omnipresent, environmental death, inscribed on both the landscape and the aggregated bodies that inhabit it, is the specific transformation that biopolitics takes in the colony: as Achille Mbembe has argued, the biopolitical project of managing and optimizing an aggregated concept of life is inverted when it encounters the colonial territory, where the European legal order is suspended. The result is a dynamic where European citizenship is defined and maintained against the disposability and "living death" of non-Europeans [...].<sup>399</sup>

In addition to the necropolitics of colonialism, *Mafarka* also exhibits the contradictions in the Futurist biopolitics of gender. I propose that the contradictory aspects Marinetti's fantasies of rebirth re-inscribe the constitutive ambivalence of maternity and reproduction in the modern biopolitical State. To enquire into this gendered biopolitics it is necessary to raise several questions. What were the Futurist politics of reproductive life? What was to be the role of the mother in proliferating the life of the population? Was Futurism's politicization of reproductive life inclined towards a politics of death that we can identify as Fascist? According to Penelope Deutscher, 'women can only be represented as the thanatopolitical threat to the future of the population or community insofar as their reproductive lives have come to count in new ways politically and biopolitically'.<sup>400</sup> She explains that '[i]nsofar as she has become principle of life (of both child and nation), the mother also becomes a potentially destructive figure'.<sup>401</sup> Marinetti's biopolitics of national rebirth would not have made sense without the politicisation of maternity and reproductive life in the biopolitical State. Yet, Marinetti disavows the vitalizing role that maternity assumes in national palingenesis by associating biological reproduction with decadence and death. Indeed, his 'Futurist Address' confirms the centrality of 'the thanatopoliticization of reproduction and maternity'<sup>402</sup> in Futurist biopolitics when he denounces 'all the blemishes that come from the inefficient vulva and bias us to old age and death!'.<sup>403</sup> Maternity becomes synonymous with death, and women are therefore put to death to foster the health of Futurist Man. The mass killing of women in *Mafarka* indicates the

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<sup>397</sup> Evan Mauro, 'Fables of Regeneration: Modernism, Biopolitics, Reproduction' (PhD dissertation, McMaster University, 2012), pp. 95-103.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 100.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>403</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 188.

biopolitical framing of the potential threat posed by tainted reproduction to the life of the nation.

As Deutscher puts it:

Reproduction is, then, not just the principle of life against which perverse and race vilified subjects have been opposed, nor the interest to which they have been subordinated. Just as much is reproduction a principle of death and its protagonists those of antilife.<sup>404</sup>

In the Futurist address at the beginning of *Mafarka*, Marinetti calls the offspring of these figures of ‘antilife’ the ‘miserable sons of the vulva’.<sup>405</sup> And yet, the Futurist adoption of the trope of the ‘male mother’ reveals the flip-side of the politicisation of reproductive life. While his devitalization of women’s bodies is, I want to suggest, a representation of ‘the emergence of “woman” as a segment of harm, impeded growth (of child and of people), mortality, [and] death’,<sup>406</sup> Marinetti’s recurrent use of the trope of the ‘male mother’ inscribes his attempts to annex the animating role assigned to maternity as the ‘principle of life (of both child and nation)’.<sup>407</sup> This explains why Marinetti identifies Futurist Man with motherhood:

In the name of human Pride that we adore, I tell you that the hour is near when men with broad foreheads and chins of steel will give birth prodigiously, by one effort of flaring will, to giants infallible in action...I tell you that the mind of man is an unpractised ovary...It is we who are the first to impregnate it.<sup>408</sup>

Marinetti announces that *Mafarka* ‘is polyphonic. It is at once a lyric poem, an epic, an adventure novel and a play’.<sup>409</sup> It is significant that, in this manifesto statement, Marinetti presents *Mafarka* as a chimerical mixture of literary forms, a monstrous transgression of generic boundaries. He further explains that this textual monster satisfies his ‘pride as creator’.<sup>410</sup>

Animating the monster is a primal scene in Marinetti’s work because it entails overcoming the natural order of sexual reproduction and replacing the formlessness of the feminized body with sculpted forms that mix heterogeneous kinds of bodies. The manufacture of the child by the male will is not a form of reproduction that fits within the naturalized biopolitical order of maternity and reproduction. As Marinetti demonstrates in *Mafarka*, the Futurist trope of animating of the monster concerns the transfer of the principle of life from the organic realm (coded as female) to the realm of art and *techne* (coded as male):

Mafarka moved on into the darkness of the bridal chamber. All around, on the tops of pillars, strove unmoving granite sphinxes and chimeras, dangled in their braided beards. Mafarka thought he could hear an ominous grunting from their expanded lungs, for these sculpted monsters were heaving at the lever of their crooked paws, striving to wrench themselves free of their shackles in order to leap forward.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Deutscher, p. 101.

<sup>405</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 3.

<sup>406</sup> Deutscher, p. 101.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>408</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 3.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid, p. 113.

This animation of the monstrous statue mirrors the animation of matter by Futurist ‘men with broad foreheads and chins of steel [who] will give birth prodigiously’.<sup>412</sup> Marinetti lays down a simple formula: the animation of inorganic matter parallels the monstrous birth of Futurist ‘Man’. Barbara Spackman has suggested that ‘the struggling of the statues’ signifies ‘the struggle of form to emerge from matter’.<sup>413</sup> She argues that Marinetti’s ‘obsession’ with ‘deanimating whatever is animate and gendered female, turning mother into matter, and with becoming a “male mother”’ follows a well-worn path that ‘is already internal to the project of idealism’.<sup>414</sup> While I find Spackman’s account of the gender politics of *Mafarka* compelling, I disagree to some extent with her attribution of the gendered violence of the text to its rerunning of the tropes of philosophical idealism. For one thing, this interpretation underplays the explicit *vitalism* of Marinetti’s biopolitical project and the centrality of ‘life’ to his fantasies of male birth.<sup>415</sup> Spackman’s claim that *Mafarka* mimics that misogynistic metaphysics of idealism in which ‘woman supplies matter, and man supplies form’ diminishes fundamental role of the *élan vital* or vital impulse in his masculinist biopolitics. I would argue that an alternative reading, one more attuned to the consanguineous relations of modernist vitalism and biopolitics, comes closer to the crux of Marinetti’s tropes of the monstrous child and the passive mother-as-matter. The major point to stress here is that idealism remains wedded to a fixed conception of ‘Man’, whilst Marinetti ties a biopolitical project invested in the renewal of life (gendered male) to the Bergsonian aspiration to move ‘beyond the human condition’.<sup>416</sup> Indeed, the sexual violence of *Mafarka* can be said to operate as a hyperbolic re-scripting of the tacit gendered assumptions informing Bergson’s dichotomy between life and matter. Rebecca Hill has argued that Bergson’s *élan vital* is implicitly gendered as a ‘seminal’ male force that invades passive matter in order to endow it with movement and creativity.<sup>417</sup> She explains that

it is not just a case of exceeding the problematic elevation of “Man” in Bergsonism. The privilege conferred upon life as movement of ascent and creation and the simultaneous degradation of matter as an obstacle of the progress of life also needs to be called into question. This violent hierarchy articulates a kind of phallic anthropomorphism, where matter is the stuff of dead weight that paternal life must impregnate or overcome in order to incarnate animate beings and introduce free acts into the world.<sup>418</sup>

As Claire Colebrook (alluding to Hill) writes in *The Death of the Posthuman*, Bergson’s affirmation of life is ‘set against a static norm of man and yet would affirm all those masculine

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>413</sup> Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, p. 72.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>415</sup> For a discussion of vitalism and biopolitics in Marinetti’s manifestoes, see Timothy Campbell, ‘Vital Matters: Sovereignty, Milieu, and the Animal in Futurism’s Founding Manifesto’, *Annali d’Italianistica*, 27 (2009), 157-173 (pp. 157-158).

<sup>416</sup> For a discussion of Bergson’s project of ‘thinking beyond the human condition’, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>417</sup> Rebecca Hill, ‘Phallocentrism in Bergson: Life and Matter’, *Deleuze Studies*, 2. Suppl (2009), 123-136 (p. 128).

<sup>418</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

figures of active, forceful, creative, incisive, penetrative, and productive life that have marked gendered thinking'.<sup>419</sup> Images of the monstrous in Marinetti point to his Futurist desire to overcome the 'static norm of man'. Yet, it is not possible to divorce this deterritorialization of 'Man' from an expansion of the masculine subject beyond the limits of the human to include animals, machines, and even matter itself. The *Über*-misogynistic brand of posthumanism that emerges from Marinetti's work nourishes itself on the fantasy of extending the borders of the forceful masculine subject indefinitely.<sup>420</sup> In Marinetti's hands, the injunction to 'be matter' voiced by the devil in Flaubert's *Temptation* is reinscribed as the injunction to *colonize* matter. A pantheistic fusion of self and world becomes a grand project of cosmic narcissism: 'Our will must come out of us so as to take hold of matter and change it to our fancy. So we can shape everything around us and endlessly renew the face of the earth'.<sup>421</sup> Enthralled by the prospect of infinite power, Gazourmah enslaves the sun in a campaign of universal tyranny: '“O Sun, I come to you as a ruler who cannot be assuaged by dominion over the world [...] I want to follow you in your course, to enter the continents of fire where you go to bask in flame, O sun, my slave”'.<sup>422</sup> To 'enter' the sun and take possession of cosmic forces, Gazourmah must ascend above the inert corpses that merge into the feminised landscape of Marinetti's Africa. Futurist monstrosity is a dynamic force that overcomes the human, but this dynamism depends on the degradation of women as formless matter. For Marinetti, the effacement of boundaries between different orders of being is the precondition for the universalization of male sovereignty. Statues of chimeras and animalized techno-bodies do not signify formlessness but an *excess* of form that springs from the form-giving capacity of Futurist life. Bergson's eloquent paeans to the 'continuous creation of unforeseeable form' become the war-cries of Gazourmah's weaponisation of the vital impulse.<sup>423</sup>

This brief sketch of Marinetti's *Über*-misogynist birth scene allows us to recognise the satiric intent of Loy's engagement with tropes of maternity and reproduction. A number of critics have argued that Loy fashioned the maternal body as a knowing affront to the Fascist body politics of Italian futurism. Tim Armstrong, for instance, suggests that her poem 'Parturition' (1914) 'inaugurates a poetics of self-abandonment, in contrast to the rigid protection of bodily integrity characteristic of Futurism'.<sup>424</sup> In Loy's poem, the boundaries of the body are dissolved amidst the fluctuations of the maternal body in the process of childbirth:

I am the centre  
Of a circle of pain

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<sup>419</sup> Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, p. 213.

<sup>420</sup> For a discussion of posthumanisms which extend the boundaries of the subject indefinitely, see Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), pp. 6-8.

<sup>421</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 146.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>423</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 30.

<sup>424</sup> Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 119.

Exceeding its boundaries in all directions<sup>425</sup>

But 'Parturition' is also a poem about the modernist body's capacity to give form to itself—to transform itself in poetic figures—fashioning its own shape and substance. Whereas Marinetti explores the limits of the human in terms of the 'body/machine complex', Loy attends here to meeting points of the human and the animal:

Rises from the subconscious  
 Impression of a cat  
 With blind kittens  
 Among her legs  
 Same undulating life-stir  
 I am that cat<sup>426</sup>

There is something potentially transformative about the speaker's identification with various forms of 'low' biological life—from a 'small animal carcass' to 'insects'—at least insofar as such articulations of interspecies identity thwart the desire to erect ontological boundaries between different species.<sup>427</sup> 'Parturition' challenges the anthropocentric tendency to exclude animality from personhood (here the lyric 'I' can refer to a cat), as well as the desire to expel abject animal matter in order to constitute the 'clean and proper body' of humanity.<sup>428</sup>

Rises from the sub-conscious  
 Impression of small animal carcass  
 Covered with blue-bottles  
 — Epicurean —  
 And through the insects  
 Waves the same undulation of living  
 Death  
 Life  
 I am knowing  
 All about  
 Unfolding<sup>429</sup>

Loy's enjambed phrase 'living/Death' suggests that organic decay brings forth new forms of vitality. For Loy the promise of the new does not await the avant-garde artist who renounces the frailties of corporeality; instead, the potentiality of the modernist body is perhaps to be located in the embryonic, the unformed, in the undoing of those categorical distinctions which separate the developed from the undeveloped, the finished from the unfinished.

The maternal body in 'Parturition' manifests its fluidity through its intimate relations with a host of animal others. Static forms give way to difference, species lose their morphological fixity: the stirring of 'incipient life' arises from the paradoxical extension and effacement of the

<sup>425</sup> Mina Loy, 'Parturition' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 4-8 (p. 4).

<sup>426</sup> Ibid, p. 7,

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> I take the phrase 'clean and proper body' from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 72.

<sup>429</sup> Loy, 'Parturition', p. 7.

individual lyric persona. In this way, Loy's speaker showcases how the maternal body meshes into the whole of 'LIFE' like a single tree whose roots form a subterranean web with an entire forest. Her Bergsonian notion of 'incipient life' undoes the idea that static forms of life transcend the incomplete process of evolution.<sup>430</sup> What is more, Loy's speaker affirms the continuity of the human and the nonhuman but not the hereditary continuity of filiation, so that the long *durée* of evolutionary time has priority over the bounded time of human finitude and the mother-child relationship. Importantly, this undoing of both the monadic individual and the parent-child bond does not lead to impersonal formlessness. Instead, the poem's various bodily forms remain open to creative deformation, to changing their co-ordinates and contours as they are traversed by flux. In accordance with Bergson's *élan vital*, the continual metamorphoses of Loy's bodily forms suggest the creativity of life itself.<sup>431</sup> In 'Aphorisms on Futurism' (1914), Loy's earliest known statement on aesthetics, she writes: 'In pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed'.<sup>432</sup> This suggests that the artist's involvement with matter is in akin to creative deformation, and these remarks bear on Loy's modernist experimentation with poetic form. Carolyn Burke has aptly suggested that Loy's manipulation of the poetic line in 'Parturition' mimics 'the rhythmic contractions and expansions of labour'.<sup>433</sup> Building on these insights, Joshua Schuster argues that 'Loy's poem is in effect a riposte to Bergson's inability to imagine the specific tensions surrounding the role of women in the furtherance of any evolutionary agenda'.<sup>434</sup> In order to restore the women to the centre of the process of evolution, then, Loy reclaims the idea of blurring the dichotomy between self and world for the maternal body, inverting the terms of Marinetti's fantasies of the colonization of matter. Without denying Loy's feminist affirmation of corporeal fluidity, I want to suggest that critics have overstressed the disparity between Marinetti and Loy's respective articulations of the modernist body. Both Marinetti and Loy produced work invested in eugenicist notions of bodily improvement in the 1910s; Loy's poetics of the maternal body is not simply an 'oppositional' aesthetic that critiques futurist body politics. Instead, Loy simultaneously ridicules Marinetti's prosthetic modernism while remaining attached to a eugenicist desire for the parturition of an improved species body.

It is not surprising that critics have focused on 'Parturition' when attempting to align Loy's work with materialist strands of contemporary posthumanism. In many ways, Loy's poem is emblematic of the modernist break with Cartesian subjectivity and the affirmation of

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<sup>430</sup> For a discussion of the Bergsonian themes in 'Parturition' see, Koudis, pp. 40-46.

<sup>431</sup> Koudis, p. 44.

<sup>432</sup> Mina Loy, 'Aphorisms on Futurism' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcenet: Manchester, 1997), p. 149.

<sup>433</sup> Carolyn Burke, 'The New Poetry and the New Woman: Mina Loy' in *Coming To Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* ed. by Dianne Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 37-57 (p. 53).

<sup>434</sup> Joshua Schuster, 'Modernist Biotopias: Organicism and Vitalism in Early Twentieth-Century American Poetry' (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007), p. 123.

embodied subject enmeshed in a network of material relations with human and nonhuman entities. Alex Goody makes it plain that ‘Parturition’ anticipates currents of posthumanist thought by submitting the poem to a Spinozist-Bergsonian-Deleuzian reading:

The embodied consciousness of the parturient woman, in the intensity of the experience, extends into the particles and flows of life. The words “extensity” and “intension” are key here: intension is both the intensity of the experience (content) and the intensional force (form) of the embodied consciousness, while the extensity is the spatial expansion of the experience (including that of the poetic line as its length fluctuates in the poem) and also the comprehensive dispersion of subjectivity as the One disintegrates into “sensation” and “forces”.<sup>435</sup>

This Deleuze-inspired readings suggest that Loy’s speaker situates herself at the birth of a new ecological conception of the human subject derived from Bergson’s philosophy of life. In his recent *Bergson: Thinking Beyond the Human Condition* (2018), Keith Ansell-Pearson writes:

Today, Bergson’s lesson contains a valuable ecological lesson. He articulates what we might call, with some hesitation, a ‘post-human’ mode of perception. This consists in the attempt to think from the perspective of life itself and to do so in a way which challenges anthropocentrism and necessitates what Rosi Braidotti has called an ‘eco-philosophy of becoming’. The posthuman has a number of senses and I intend it in the sense of denoting, as Braidotti puts it, a ‘sensibility that aims at overcoming anthropocentrism’.<sup>436</sup>

In contrast to Marinetti’s anthropocentric vision of Futurist Man, the birth scene in Loy’s ‘Parturition’ does not entail bringing about new relations with technology or the exclusion of *zoē*. According to Claire Colebrook, the ‘Bergsonian appeal to life beyond the bounds of the already formed organism is in line with a broader modernist critique of the figure of man as a Cartesian subject. Anti-Cartesianism generally has proceeded by appealing affirmatively — against *man* — to qualities that had once been figured as feminine but that now seem to offer ways of thinking about the vital order as such’.<sup>437</sup> The appeals to life in ‘Parturition’ perform an ecstatic affirmation of evolution conceived as an undifferentiated flux not confined within bounded organisms. Indeed, it would be hard to find a modernist poem that more vividly demonstrates this anti-Cartesian dynamic, whereby qualities formerly considered feminine within a patriarchal order of representation come to stand for creative becoming of life itself. The futurity of Loy’s work, on this reading, resides in its affirmation of the ascendancy of life’s impersonal and material flows over the enclosed body of the individualised human subject.

Appealing to animality, fluid matter, generation, decay, and female embodiment entails an abandonment of the transcendent (male) lyric subject. In many ways, ‘Parturition’ seems to anticipate Rosi Braidotti’s posthumanist call to accelerate ‘the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of transspecies solidarity on the basis of our being in this

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<sup>435</sup> Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 46.

<sup>436</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Bergson*, p. 6.

<sup>437</sup> Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, p. 214.

together — environmentally based, embodied, embedded, and in symbiosis’.<sup>438</sup> Posthumanism not only denies the privilege of the human with regard to its animal others; it reframes linear models of evolution that relegate animality to the pre-history of the human species. ‘Parturition’ is Loy’s affirmation of an alternative temporality which inverts linear time in order to achieve the undoing of the human/animal divide. The erosion of a clear-cut distinction between the past and the present is one of Bergson’s primary contributions to philosophy, and one which had a profound influence on the anti-positivist temporalities that feature in the canonical works of modernist art and literature. As Donna V. Jones puts it: ‘For Bergson, [...] the duration in which our consciousness exists freely has the past, present, and future interpenetrate in violation of the canons of logic’.<sup>439</sup> In Loy’s ‘Parturition’, the present tense (‘I am that cat’) telescopes extensive models of linear time into an intensive becoming which defies the principle of non-contradiction. This transspecies becoming, furthermore, enacts what Elizabeth Grosz, after Nietzsche, calls ‘the possibility of being *untimely*’, which entails nonlinear exchanges between past, present, and future.<sup>440</sup> Indeed, for Grosz, the yet-to-be-animated life of the future receives its most vital impetus from the past: ‘The task’, she claims, ‘is to make elements of this past live again, to be reenergized through their untimely or anachronistic recall in the present’.<sup>441</sup> We find a similar call for the ‘untimely or anachronistic’ in Loy’s speaker’s identification with insect and feline forms of life. Indeed, one might say that the speaker’s ‘becoming-world’ — her ecological extension ‘beyond the human condition’, in Bergson’s terms—does not occur in a singular instant but rather activates the interpenetration of diverse temporalities.<sup>442</sup> Life is creative *because* it is atavistic. Bergson underlined the continuity between the present and the origin of the vital impulse:

Where, then, does the vital principle of the individual begin or end? Gradually we shall be carried further and further back up to the individual’s remotest ancestors: we shall find him solidary with that little mass of protoplasmic jelly which is probably at the root of the genealogical tree of life. Being, to a certain extent, one with this primitive ancestor, he is also solidary with all that descends from that ancestor in divergent directions.<sup>443</sup>

Loy follows Bergson in her conviction that movement precedes (and exceeds) form. Creativity is about reactivating the initial generative force of life. Yet, if Loy sketches out a ‘biocentred egalitarianism’, in which ‘*Zoe* as a generative vitality is a major transversal force that cuts across and connects previously segmented domains’, then how does this affirmation of extra-

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<sup>438</sup> Rosi Braidotti, ‘Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others’, *PMLA*, 124.2 (March 2009), 526-532 (p. 530).

<sup>439</sup> Jones, p. 87.

<sup>440</sup> Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, p. 117.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> I take the phrase ‘becoming-world’ from Rosi Braidotti, ‘Becoming-World’ in *After Cosmopolitanism*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, Bolette Blaagaard (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 8-27. Braidotti defines ‘becoming-world’ as ‘being-one-with the vital processes of transformation alongside and with a multiplicity of human and non-human others’, (p. 8).

<sup>443</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 43.



human 'Life' as an impersonal, immanent, and ongoing process relate to her explicit investment in the biological improvement of the human?<sup>444</sup>

Joshua Schuster has argued that Loy's vitalism subverts the deterministic conceptions of the living body that enable biopolitical control *over* life. For Schuster, critics who read Loy's engagement with life through the lens of biopolitics imply 'that only power and control truly define the connection of biology to politics. This determinist model of control itself seems questionable if we begin to consider how, after Darwin and Bergson, the organic can be understood as contingent, constantly variable, and tending towards complexity'.<sup>445</sup> In contrast, I propose that there is a link between Loy's Bergsonian commitment to viewing life as a contingent, variable, and complex process and her commitment to normative ideas of 'improving' the life of the human species. As Claire Colebrook aptly suggests, 'Loy's futurism [...] seems torn between radical in-humanism [...] and seemingly parochial humanism'.<sup>446</sup> In the next section of this chapter, I propose that Loy's 'parochial humanism' asserts itself in her depictions of the immobility of the nonstandard body.

### **Loy, Eugenics and the Impaired Body in Modernism**

Loy's vitalism emerged as part of the interwoven group of modernist discourses about 'life' that included the eugenicist ideologies circulating around 1910. Loy's most explicit eugenicist statement appears in her 'Feminist Manifesto', written in 1914 but unpublished during her lifetime. 'Each woman of superior intelligence,' Loy argues, 'should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate members of her sex'.<sup>447</sup> With the examples of Loy's affirmations of 'Life' in mind we can read these statements as confirming Claire Colebrook's concerns about 'the underlying sexual (and racial) normativity that any privileging of life would entail'.<sup>448</sup> According to Paul Peppis, Loy's manifesto is a document of 'insurgent and eugenic feminism'.<sup>449</sup> Peppis has demonstrated the extent to which Loy's adoption of the vocabulary of racial science, particularly in the context of a feminist manifesto, is typical of the rhetoric deployed in the pioneering work of pre-war progressives. Indeed, some of the most prominent and radical feminists of the period were public supporters of racial science. Rachel Carroll explains that 'leading female proponents of birth control and planned parenthood, such as Margaret Sanger and Marie Stopes, were [...]

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<sup>444</sup> Braidotti, 'Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others', p. 530.

<sup>445</sup> Schuster, p. 24.

<sup>446</sup> Claire Colebrook, 'Incorporeal Modernism' in *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Paul Ardoïn, S.E. Gontarski, Lacy Mattison (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 223-244 (p. 237).

<sup>447</sup> Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 153-156 (p. 155).

<sup>448</sup> Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, p. 283.

<sup>449</sup> Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, p. 170.

advocates of eugenics'.<sup>450</sup> For Michael Davidson, Loy's eugenicist proclivities of the 1910s are related to the 'unholy alliance between a progressive woman's movement and retrograde racialist theories [that] troubled the utopian promises of social and cultural innovation during the first decades of the twentieth century'.<sup>451</sup> As we will see, Loy's depictions of non-normative embodiment vitiate her subversive sexual politics.

Like many of her radical feminist contemporaries Loy enlists eugenicist ideas in the service of political reform; this accounts for the fact that her depictions of non-normate bodies are imbricated with her 'anarcho-maternalist' polemics.<sup>452</sup> In the poem 'Babies in Hospital' (1916), for instance, Loy figures the politics of the so-called 'sex-war' through disability; here, the poem's truncated lines reflect the truncated limbs of a disabled child:

Small Elena  
Of shrunken limbs  
And ample sex  
Who  
Having filched  
The atrophied  
Woman-smile of your mother  
Scatter it on the unseen  
Tuberculous<sup>453</sup>

Loy artfully manipulates bodily and poetic scale in order to generate the poem's central political conceit: the inverse proportions of Elena's 'shrunken limbs' and 'ample sex' creates a juxtaposition of disability and femininity. This is also the case with the interplay between visible femininity ('Woman-smile') and invisible disease ('unseen/Tuberculous'). The poem's sardonic conflation of congenital impairment with the visible signs of womanhood points to the oblique relationship between Loy's work of the 1910s and the rhetorical strategies of progressive era feminism. Loy's poem uses tropes of disability to satirise what she elsewhere labels the 'fashions in lechery' of the male avant-garde.<sup>454</sup> She lampoons relations between the genders when the congenitally disabled Elena becomes an object of desire for an infant male with 'only a broken leg'.<sup>455</sup> With our tongues firmly in our cheeks, we might choose to view this male child as a miniature Marinetti:

Already gallant  
You smooth the mackintosh  
For Elena to sit beside you'.<sup>456</sup>

<sup>450</sup> Rachel Carroll, "'Making the Blood Flow Backwards": disability, heterosexuality and the politics of representation in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*', *Textual Practice*, 29.1 (2015), 155-172 (p. 167).

<sup>451</sup> Michael Davidson, 'Introduction: Women Writing Disability' *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 30.1 (2013), 1-17 (p. 9).

<sup>452</sup> Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, p. 170.

<sup>453</sup> Mina Loy, 'Babies in Hospital' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 24-26 (p. 24).

<sup>454</sup> Mina Loy, 'Lion's Jaw' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 46-52 (p. 47).

<sup>455</sup> Loy, 'Babies in Hospital', p. 25.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*

Here, Loy's use of disability to satirise gender relations indicates how interwoven her critique of masculine modernism is with her depiction of non-normative bodies.

Since the child born of the 'anarcho-maternalist' mother in 'Parturition' is absent from the poem, it is striking that infant figures in Loy's early verse are frequently diseased, disabled, and even monstrous.<sup>457</sup> In song IV of her signature poem "Songs to Joannes" (1917), a 'dysgenic' family are presented as monstrous amalgamations of human and animal:

Once in a mezzanine  
The starry ceiling  
Vaulted an unimaginable family  
Bird-like abortions  
With human throats<sup>458</sup>

The human-animal hybridity of these figures is suggestive of the pre-Enlightenment conception of monstrosity as 'the mixture of two species'.<sup>459</sup> This would seem to suggest something like the carnivalesque overturning of the natural order that is promised by Loy's invocation of 'Pig Cupid' in the poems opening lines.<sup>460</sup> However, the anomalous boundary-crossing forms of this 'unimaginable family' cannot be dissociated from intimations of their 'dysgenic' heredity. From this perspective, the monstrous family in song IV are not a subversive articulation of species hybridity, nor are they figurations of a carnivalesque inversion of the great chain of being; instead, as Peppis has argued, they are a troubling example of Loy's eugenic modernism.<sup>461</sup> Peppis contends that the family's 'freakish' bodies are evidence of Loy's 'lingering investments in the eugenic feminism and free-loving maternalism championed in "Feminist Manifesto" and "Parturition"'.<sup>462</sup> As we will see, images of 'dysgenic' parturition appear frequently in Loy's poems of the period.

In her 1917 poem 'Human Cylinders', Loy enquires into the intersection of mechanization, sexual intercourse and 'dysgenic' procreation. The poem's satiric dramatization of the passionless, monotonous coupling of sexless automatons has little in common with the triumphalist zeal of Marinetti's male birth scenes. These machine-like figures are 'simplified' beings, mere 'human cylinders/ Revolving in the enervating dust'; and their insentient intercourse is depicted as sheer automatism—nothing more than 'the lucid rush-together of automatons'.<sup>463</sup> If '[t]he fear of "becoming automaton" haunts Bergson's thought from

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<sup>457</sup> For some illuminating remarks on the disabled child in modernist aesthetics see Michael Davidson, 'Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity'. Davidson argues that in the modernist period 'the disabled child becomes the spectre of tainted blood that eugenics sought to control', (p. 134).

<sup>458</sup> Mina Loy, 'Songs to Joannes' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 53-70 (p. 54).

<sup>459</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 63.

<sup>460</sup> Mina Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 53.

<sup>461</sup> Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism*, p. 182.

<sup>462</sup> Loy, 'Human Cylinders', p. 40.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

beginning to end',<sup>464</sup> then Loy stitches together Bergson's disdain for the mechanization of life with the eugenicist language of atavism and biological inefficiency. In stark contrast to the 'prosthetic gods' that are the product of the futurist myth of autogenesis, the child produced by techno-maternity in 'Human Cylinders' is an atavistic creature from way down the Darwinian evolutionary scale:

One little whining beast  
Whose longing  
Is to slink back to the antediluvian burrow.<sup>465</sup>

While we might expect that the union of the marionette-like 'human cylinders' would produce a similarly mechanical offspring, Loy subverts the expectations of her avant-garde readership by connecting technological-maternity to the narrative of atavistic regression. Loy's 'dysgenic' child—much like the 'rough beast' in W.B. Yeats's 'The Second Coming'—presages both an atavistic return to a primordial past and the dismal prospect of a degenerate future. In relating the mechanical and bestial, the posthuman and the primeval, Loy satirises the futurist faith in the technological transcendence of the frailties of the human body. However, she articulates her critique of Marinetti's prosthetic modernism in eugenicist terms not unlike those employed in the Futurist's own explosive texts. Though Loy's carnal poetics rebuts the rigid Futurist body in favour of a form of corporeality with permeable boundaries, she depicts the arrested development of the regressive 'beast' child as a static form of being which falls short of her Bergsonian commitment to the fluidity of life as creative evolution.

'Human Cylinders' defies Futurist biopolitics insofar as it disconnects technology from the vitalizing function it performs in Marinetti's manifesto. In that text, Marinetti imagines atavistic life as a transformative and vitalizing force. According to Timothy Campbell, 'the modernism that emerges in the "Founding Manifesto of Futurism" cannot be separated from a biologization of and animalization of life that qualifies it as primitive and as originating in an earlier period'.<sup>466</sup> Loy's dramatization of the technological birth of the 'weak' atavistic child mocks Marinetti's desire 'to revive a primordial, mythic past in an animalization of the Futurist'.<sup>467</sup> Unlike Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, Marinetti assert that animality belongs to the future of the human species, although his proposal for an 'animalization of the Futurist' does not involve a return to a pre-technological condition but rather a revitalised form of life made possible by the machine: 'technology offers the possibility of vitalizing — by animalizing — vast swathes of the population'.<sup>468</sup> Campbell argues that 'the technological sovereign evinced in the manifesto creates a milieu, in which life becomes not only more vital, but also in which a kind of politicized zoology can be practiced on technologically produced

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<sup>464</sup> Jones, p. 85.

<sup>465</sup> Loy, 'Human Cylinders', p. 41.

<sup>466</sup> Timothy Campbell, 'Vital Matters: Sovereignty, Milieu, and the Animal in Futurism's Founding Manifesto', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 27 (2009), 157-173 (pp.157-158).

<sup>467</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid, pp. 157-158.

populations'.<sup>469</sup> A reactivation of the past, in Marinetti's vision of rebirth, would initiate a form of nonlinear progress incompatible with the unidirectional temporality of liberal modernity. For example, Lucia Re notes that 'Marinetti and other representatives of the Italian futurist avant-garde consistently invoked barbarism as a distinctive futurist trait'.<sup>470</sup> This reframing of barbarism as a marker of futurity draws on Nietzsche's call for a 'new barbarian' that would act as a regenerative counter-force to European decline.<sup>471</sup> In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asserts that he 'prefer[s] to understand the rare human beings of an age as suddenly appearing, late ghosts of past cultures and their powers: as atavisms of a people and its mores'.<sup>472</sup> In this narrative of regeneration-through-atavism Marinetti's affirmation of the vitalized life of Futurist Man contrasts with his 'indictment of the sick, the infirm, and the dying'.<sup>473</sup>

If the distinction between human and nonhuman does not hold in posthumanist thought then the same is true of the distinction between life and death. Within a Deleuzian framework, death cannot be the opposite of life because 'the germinality of the most destructive inclinations and tendencies' ensures that death is never the end.<sup>474</sup> Those incompatible terms, life and death, turn out to be reciprocal forces, so that each affords a stimulus for the other. Life says yes to death; death answers life in the same way. As regards Loy, Dancy Mason has argued for a posthumanist reading of her poetry based on 'Loy's undoing of the life/death boundary and her revaluation of feminine identity away from Cartesian binaries'.<sup>475</sup> One doubt that emerges in this context is that Braidotti's monistic posthumanism cannot account for the idea that there are two kinds of life, and thus two kinds of death. Campbell states, 'Not only will Marinetti counterpoise, therefore, one life to another, the Futurist to the *passatista*, in whom the power of death meets no resistance, and in whom the potential power of life has been weakened by dominance of death'.<sup>476</sup> What counts here is that Marinetti and Loy subscribe to a dichotomy of vital and anti-vital bodies informed by Bergson's dualistic conception of life and matter.

In *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), Mel Y. Chen explains that 'matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise "wrong" animates cultural life in important ways'.<sup>477</sup> She further posits that 'animacy is implicated in political questions of power and the recognition of different subjects, as well as ostensible

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>470</sup> Lucia Re, 'Barbari Civilizzatissimi: Marinetti and the Futurist Myth of Barbarism', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17.3 (2012), 350-368 (p. 350).

<sup>471</sup> Maria Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 85.

<sup>472</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. by Bernard Williams, trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 36.

<sup>473</sup> Campbell, 'Vital Matters', p. 169.

<sup>474</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Germinant Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 115.

<sup>475</sup> Dancy Mason, 'Modernist Posthumanism in Moore, H.D., and Loy' (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2017), p. 27.

<sup>476</sup> Campbell, 'Vital Matters', p. 163.

<sup>477</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 2.

objects'.<sup>478</sup> The inanimation of the *passatista* ('il moribunde') in Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto finds echoes in Loy's poetry of the 1910s and 1920s. Maren Tova Linett argues that 'modernism [...] acts to *enforce* normalcy. In what might be called its eugenic mode, it associates disability with aspects of human being it disdains'.<sup>479</sup> Throughout her 1910s poems Loy characterises paralysis and bodily impairment as obstacles halting the dynamism of becoming and female sexuality. In 'Italian Pictures', the Futurist dichotomy between British inertia and Italian dynamism maps into the distinction between passive nature and vitalized technology. On one side, Loy links British codes of femininity to the motionlessness of vegetal life through the juxtaposition of 'Old lady sitting still' with 'Pine trees standing quite still'.<sup>480</sup> On the other, her Futurist description of the 'passionate Italian life-traffic/ Throbbing the street' combines vital and affective intensities with technological dynamism.<sup>481</sup> Loy's desire to affirm 'Life' is the flip-side of her dramatization of the 'invalid' body as an inert object — a 'bronchitis-kettle'.<sup>482</sup> Like the '*dwellers in Gout and Paralysis*'<sup>483</sup> mocked in the prologue to *Mafarka the Futurist* — who are frozen in immobility and unreceptive to the vitalizing energies of technology — Loy's ageing woman suffers from a 'prolonged invalidism' and 'Rigor Mortis', and her 'hobby of collecting death beds' is an 'insult' to 'Life'.<sup>484</sup> The Bergsonian dichotomy of mobile life and immobile matter accounts for Loy's presentation of fertility and dynamism as mutually reinforcing categories: movement signals biological futurity; paralysis signals inanimation and the infertility of old age and death. In contrast to the 'hips' of Italian women which 'sway/ Among the crawling children they produce', Loy's emphasis on the immobility of a 'consumptive' with a 'broken' wheelchair aligns impairment with stasis.<sup>485</sup>

### ***Insel and the Limits of Modernist Monstrosity***

*Insel* is a novel in which the body's materiality spills into the foreground. The plot centres on the relationship between Mrs Jones, the narrator, and Insel, an artist. Insel inhabits an ontological limbo in which, relieved from the duty of making sense, he flickers between animation and inanimation, the human and the nonhuman. In defiance of the image-management that sustains the mythos of avant-garde authenticity, Insel flaunts his fakery by re-enacting the plots of Franz Kafka's fiction and passing them off as biographical episodes. As we shall see, the novel's modernist technique receives it (de)formative impetus from the ungraspable nature of Insel's body. His inability to manage his corporeal being mainly

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>479</sup> Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 200.

<sup>480</sup> Mina Loy, 'Italian Pictures' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 9-14, (p. 9).

<sup>481</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Marinetti, *Mafarka*, p. 1.

<sup>484</sup> Loy, 'Italian Pictures', p. 9.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11.

manifests itself in his constant hunger, which Jones assuages by providing him with food, although she also provides him shelter and nurses him when his weakened body succumbs to illness. Hence Jones and Insel's relationship is structured around the caregiver/invalid, health/sickness and normal/abnormal dichotomies. Needless to say, Insel's 'aberrant' body places him firmly on the 'abnormal' side of these binaries. The opening passage relates an anecdote about Insel that incorporates madness, hunger, sexual desire, disgust, and bodily decay:

The first I heard of Insel was the story of a madman, more or less a surrealist painter, who, although he had nothing to eat, was hoping to sell a picture to buy a set of false teeth. He wanted, he said, to go to the bordel but feared to disgust a prostitute with a mouthful of roots.<sup>486</sup>

Loy's narrative begins by acknowledging that Insel's body is lacking certain parts — namely, his teeth. There are certain parallels between Insel's chronic deterioration and the progress (such as it is) of the novel's plot; as the narrative unfolds, the decomposition and decay of Insel's body becomes more pronounced, and vital parts of the starving artist's anatomy appear to be missing. Jones describes how Insel 'clutched his feeble fist where his stomach should have been': a corporeal absence which hearkens back to Insel's toothless gums and gestures towards further bodily diminishments.<sup>487</sup> Throughout, Insel's body is riddled with absences and gaps, forestalling any attempt to imagine his body as a coherent whole. It is as if Insel's physique is constantly involved in the process of its own dissolution, raising the weakness and vulnerability of his body to the level of an ontological inconsistency that inheres in the fabric of his being.

The most remarkable manifestations of Insel's weakness involve the attenuation of his bodily materiality. Loy registers the lessening or deterioration of Insel's body in two ways: first, as I have already noted, through the repeated references to Insel's starvation and declining health; and secondly, through the various descriptions of his body as vanishing. Thus, Insel's corporeal vulnerability is not explicable simply in terms of the 'pathological' weakness caused by his emaciation; instead, it is inextricably related to his ontological inconsistency, the diminishment in being that haunts his movements within the novel. Jones explains at one point that Insel 'had so weakened, become so transparent', as if his body is on the verge of disappearing.<sup>488</sup> Throughout the novel in fact, Insel renders the distinction between materiality and immateriality whimsically defunct, as Jones explains to him:

You always give me the impression that you are *not there*. Sometimes you have no inside; sometimes no outside, and never enough of anything to entirely materialize. Like a quicksand, when one looks at you whatever one gets a glimpse of you immediately rush up from your own depths to snatch. *Your* way of being alive is a sequence of disappearances.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 3.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36.

His tendency to vanish, however, only makes him all the more fascinating—and, paradoxically, all the more *present*: ‘The less [Insel] seemed to be “there,” the more he spilled into the unknown, the more clearly I apprehended him’.<sup>490</sup> At times, Insel’s vanishing body seems evacuated of substantiality: a ghost or shadow of living matter. Nonetheless, at other times he is presented as a starving ‘degenerate’, his ‘preposterously emaciated’ body wasting away from lack of nourishment.<sup>491</sup> This dialectic of ghostly de-materialisation and uncontained carnality animates Insel’s self-cancelling materializations throughout the text. The question is: how are we to understand Insel’s vacillation between phantom disembodiment and monstrous materiality? What exactly is at stake—aesthetically, historically, politically—in Loy’s depiction of the decorporealisation of this ‘degenerate’ artist?

Loy’s novelistic engendering of Insel’s body is no mere exercise in modernist formalism, nor does it simply rehearse her earlier investments in eugenicist notions of bodily improvement. Crucial here is that Loy wrote the novel in the years when the Nazi’s stepped up their attacks against so-called ‘degenerate’ artists in the 1930s. I want to suggest that the historical situation of exile and oppression experienced by German modernists underlies Loy’s presentation of Insel’s monstrosity. It is striking that Insel’s ‘aberrant’ body overlaps with Nazi codifications of the ‘degenerate’ body.<sup>492</sup> Insel is an ex-convict, a morphine addict, physically deformed, emaciated, and possibly insane; he ekes out his rootless existence haunting the modern metropolis in the company of prostitutes and other ‘undesirables’. Furthermore, Insel’s devotion to the writings of Franz Kafka perhaps aligns him with Jewishness, as Christine Walter has suggested.<sup>493</sup> Nazi definitions of the ‘degenerate’ included a range of ‘types’ deemed inferior to the Aryan ideal of bodily health. Needless to say, the Nazi eugenic programme of racial decontamination was premised upon the exclusion and extermination of people with physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as Jews, Gypsies, and criminals. Tobin Siebers usefully summarises the imbrication of ‘degeneracy’ and aesthetics that began in the fin-de-siècle and reached a horrifying denouement in Nazi Germany:

*Degeneration* was principally a medical term before Max Nordau applied it to art. It referred throughout the last half of the nineteenth century to individuals who departed from norms of human health because of genetic difference, sexual habits deemed excessive, or shattered nerves. The Nazis applied these distinctions as standards of aesthetic beauty. Degenerate art deserved its name in their view because it included bodily deformities, bloodshot eyes, feebleness, and signs of nervous exhaustion—all disabling conditions supposedly brought about by racial impurity or the stress of modern life. Jews, homosexuals, and criminals were automatically assumed to be biologically inferior, and the Nazis found evidence of their assumptions in the physical traits given to people in works of modern art.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>492</sup> Sarah Hayden, *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artishood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), p. 191.

<sup>493</sup> Christine Walter, *Optical Impersonality: Science, Images and Literary Modernism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 155.

<sup>494</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 31.



A number of the events and characters in *Insel* are traceable to Loy's friendship between 1933 and 1936 with the German painter Richard Oelze, an artist then working on the outskirts of the Surrealist avant-garde. Like many German modernists, Oelze left his native land for Paris in 1933, the year the Nazi party took power.<sup>495</sup> Not insignificantly, this was also the year that the *Schreckenskammern der Kunst* (Horror Chamber of Art) gave the first exhibition of so-called 'degenerate art' in Germany.<sup>496</sup> This was followed by the notorious 'Degenerate Art' exhibition in 1937, which gathered together thousands of artworks—including classic works of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism. The exhibition was replete with modernist artworks depicting bodies that deviate from the 'healthy' neoclassical physiques synonymous with Nazi aesthetics. In the context of the 1930s, then, the ambiguous relation of Insel's 'degenerate' body to disappearance and death is highly contentious. After all, the Degenerate Art exhibition instituted a violent economy of display and disappearance: the artworks exhibited on the walls of the gallery featured precisely the kinds of bodies which the Nazis wanted to make disappear from the German Reich.

*Insel* grants monstrosity a very different political significance than that which it has in Loy's eugenicist modernism of the 1910s. In spite of his degeneracy, Insel's body nonetheless evades any attempt to pin down the aetiology of his degenerate characteristics. It is the very indeterminacy of Insel's monstrosity that generates its challenge to eugenics and degenerationist discourses of heredity. By declining to become fully present, Insel refuses (or fails) to comply with those forms of exposure which seek to capture 'degeneracy' as a fixed biological attribute. Jones tells us that Insel does 'not give a fig for heredity', and his refusal of biological determinism is also registered at the level of Loy's narrative form.<sup>497</sup> Insel's monstrosity is as much a result of his ungraspable bodily form as it is any of his particular attribute. He is variously described as 'pathetically maimed',<sup>498</sup> as 'an embryonic mind locked in a dilapidated structure',<sup>499</sup> as 'pretty repulsive',<sup>500</sup> as 'a skull with ligaments attached',<sup>501</sup> as 'so emaciated that from the waist down he looked like a stork on one leg',<sup>502</sup> as a 'human wreck',<sup>503</sup> and as a 'bloodless carcass' with hands that are 'unpleasantly embryonic'.<sup>504</sup> This cursory index of Insel's monstrosity gives a clear indication of the extent to which his body deviates from socio-cultural, biological and ontological norms. It is particularly noteworthy that he is described in terms of the embryonic and the posthumous—as germinating and as

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<sup>495</sup> Elizabeth Arnold, 'Afterword' (1991) in *Insel* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 169-176 (p. 173).

<sup>496</sup> Sarah Hayden, 'Introduction' in *Insel* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), ix-xxxii (p. xxviii).

<sup>497</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 15.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

decomposing—mixing the most fundamental categories by which we organise beings into the quick and the dead. Indeed, just as Loy combines materiality and immateriality in her depiction of Insel's body, so life and death shade into one another in the novel. It seems that Insel's body refuses to stay on either side of the dichotomy of the animate and inanimate: he is 'monster made from dead flesh'.<sup>505</sup> Jones also compares Insel to 'a dead man who should vomit himself back into life'.<sup>506</sup> This horrific image of revitalization is paradoxical: vomiting can connote a rejection of life insofar as it is a visceral refusal of the nourishment necessary for organic survival; more, this undecidable oscillation between death and life recalls Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject as 'what disturbs identity, system, order, What does not respect boundaries, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.<sup>507</sup> Insel's repulsive anatomy manifests a corresponding disregard for taxonomic boundaries. Consider his monstrous hands:

Insel [...] had fearsome hands, narrow, and pallid like his face, with a hard, square ossification towards the base of the back, and then so compressed as if driving an instrument against some great resistance [...] But out of [an] atavistic base his hands grew into the new sensibility of a younger generation, in his case excessive; his fingers clung together like a kind of pulpoid antennae, seemingly inert in their superfine sensibility, being aquiver with such miniscule vibrations they scarcely needed to move—fingers almost alarmingly fresh and pink for extremities of that bloodless carcass, the idle digits of some pampered daughter [...] All the same there was something unpleasantly embryonic about them. I had never seen anything that gave this impression of the cruel difficulty of coming apart since, in my babyhood, I had watched a freak in Barnum's circus unjoin the ominous limpness of the legs of his undeveloped twin.<sup>508</sup>

Insel's hands are atavistically strong and aristocratically refined, male and female, embryonic and decadent. They also embody the intersection of monstrosity and artistic production that Loy explores in the novel. His hands are both a tool by which he brings his monstrous designs into the world and the fleshy embodiment of his own monstrous deterioration. They are embryonically unformed but also a means for bringing forth the embryonic forms of his art. Insel's art is composed of a radically inhuman vision of life that exceeds the closure of the monadic body. Jones makes it clear that Insel's 'elementals' do not conform to stable, ordered conceptions of life. His anomalous body becomes an insect, or a 'foetid' tree trunk with luminescent bark.<sup>509</sup> These metamorphoses are not limited to organic life, but include his transformation into air and other intangible atmospheric forces. Insel is composed of 'mists of chaos',<sup>510</sup> 'procreational chaotic vapour',<sup>511</sup> 'electric emissions',<sup>512</sup> and even 'spectral

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid, p.134.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>507</sup> Kristev, p. 4.

<sup>508</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 118.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

spermatozoa'.<sup>513</sup> He radiates a 'host of elementals'<sup>514</sup> and atmospheric forces 'carried by the air'.<sup>515</sup> Becoming a spectral substance or an 'elemental mist' involves replacing the bounded individual body with fluid materialities that have no conclusive form.<sup>516</sup> In contrast to Loy's earlier investment in the eugenic progress of the human species, this 'vibratory flux' is resistant to anthropocentric ideas of the divinization of the human animal.<sup>517</sup> The essence of these visions is their atavistic reversal of linear or progressive ideas of evolution, their recurring display of primordial forms of life engendered by retrogression. *Insel*'s lyrical paeans to life forms that are germinal, inhuman, and aleatory imply a desire to escape human orders of classification. And Jones's resolve to conceive 'incipient form' stirs surreal visions of proliferating life.<sup>518</sup> In other words, *Insel* charts out the primordial life that Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein describe as 'life before life, pre- or protolife, or a kind of wild, "savage" life before it was reined in by the constraints of humanism'.<sup>519</sup> To make contact with this 'protolife', Jones must 'forget' existing forms, and even become formless herself. Loss of form is the impetus for the creation of form.

*Insel* appeals to conflicting paradigms of the living dead. It does not require excessive critical acumen to notice Insel's resemblance to the figures of 1930s cinematic horror. At one point Jones even suggests that Insel audition for the part of a monster in a horror film.<sup>520</sup> While the novel does contain a reference to William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1927), which introduced the Haitian *zombii* to international readers, Sarah Hayden has noted that 'in one second-draft (typed) copy of the manuscript, Loy pencilled in the word "zombie." In so doing, she designates him as a being that is alike in every respect to a human that is devoid of consciousness'.<sup>521</sup> In *The Magic Island*, Seabrook explains that '[t]he *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life — it is a dead body which is made to walk and act as if it were alive'.<sup>522</sup> If Insel's vacillations between the material and the ethereal constitute an anamorphic doubling of the monstrous, then he also fuses two different figures of the living dead: the spectre and the zombie. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains: 'Whereas a ghost is a "soul without a body," the zombie (according to Zora Neale Hurston in her seminal account of folklore in Haiti) is a body deprived of a soul'.<sup>523</sup> By combining the zombie and the spectre, Insel blurs the dichotomy

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>519</sup> Colebrook and Weinstein, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>520</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 57.

<sup>521</sup> Hayden, *Curious Disciplines*, p. 199.

<sup>522</sup> William Seabrook qtd. in Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), p. 32.

<sup>523</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Grey: A Zombie Ecology' in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 381-394 (p. 383).

between these contrasting ontologies of the undead. Deanimated (or ‘soulless’) bodies co-exist alongside spectral (or disembodied) presences. Loy’s conjuring of Insel’s bodily oscillations make sure that the material and the immaterial are indistinguishable. The chiasmus between the solid matter of soulless flesh and the spectral transmission of nonsolid, ethereal substances finds expression in the distance between the ‘fallible pulp’<sup>524</sup> of his corpse-body and the ‘electric emissions’ of his *Strahlen*. Loy does not divorce the soulless bodies of the horror genre from their ghostly counterparts.<sup>525</sup> Instead of positing the zombie and the spectre as opposing figures of the living dead, she dramatizes the intermingling of decomposing flesh and ethereal matter within a material continuum in a state of continuous flux. This continuum of the undead that extends from the zombie to the spectre amalgamates the distinctive monstrosities of the horror genre. According to Anna Powell, in horror films ‘[b]odies without souls have non-human life of their own, and spirits without their former bodies have become-ethereal’.<sup>526</sup> Insel’s participation in the realms of the living dead would seem to deny him any access to the germinal forces of growth or generation. Yet in *Insel*, decomposing flesh, fragmented bodies, and degenerate artists showcase the creativity of that which we assume to belong outside the context of the living.

In *Insel*, the co-presence of past, present, and future invites us to imagine various ways of tracing the ties between degeneracy, innovation, and the question of (aesthetic and bodily) form. *Insel* belongs to that counter-current in degeneration theory that ‘assumes and valorizes the different, the dissimilar, and the abnormal inasmuch as they are innovative and transformative aspects of reality’.<sup>527</sup> If we regard Insel’s metamorphoses as expressions of a generative force that annuls the preservation of (human) form, then his deformity seem to affirm the monstrosity of becoming other-than-human. In *Insel*, degeneration is a generative process: for example, Jones tells Insel that his monstrous condition is ‘not pathological — only unprecedented’.<sup>528</sup> All the discourses which conceive the degenerate body as anti-vital would necessarily fail to account for this inhuman agency. Exceeding the human form, degenerating life makes possible an inhuman resurgence of the *élan vital*. At the same time, however, Insel’s zombie body seems closer to a form of living death which constrains the emergence of the new. Zombies are effigies of improper survival or animation ‘out of place’; the living cadaver is only a remainder, or leftover, of the rational subject or person.<sup>529</sup>

The spectral tradition that leaves its trace in *Insel* derives from the Surrealist lineage of the ghostly, which, as Katherine Conley has shown, originated in the eighteenth century Gothic

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<sup>524</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 82.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>526</sup> Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 63.

<sup>527</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>528</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 95.

<sup>529</sup> Christian Moraru, ‘Undying Theory: Levinas, Place, and the Technology and Posthumousness’ in *Dead Theory: Derrida, Death, and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. by Jeffrey R. Di Leo (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 217-232 (p. 222).

literature, and drew inspiration from mesmerism, spiritualism, and psychoanalysis.<sup>530</sup> According to Conley, ‘with their appropriation of spiritualist automatism the young surrealists transformed the ghosts that practitioners of spiritualism sought to conjure into ephemeral forces within the unconscious mind’.<sup>531</sup> Spiritualism was concerned above all with the possibility of communication between the living and dead. And yet, the anti-materialist focus of spiritualism did not preclude its influence on late nineteenth-century science. Founded in England in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPS)

believed the paranormal must be investigated using scientific methods, and demonstrated their commitment by exposing the fraudulent character of table-rapping, ectoplasm, spirit photography, letters materializing from mysterious mahatmas and the like.<sup>532</sup>

F.W. Myers, one of the original members of the SPS, composed a study of the paranormal entitled *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), which Loy discussed in a letter with her friend Mabel Dodge.<sup>533</sup> While he grounded his studies in the aspiration to prove the immortality of the human individual, Myers was convinced that ‘the life of the mind mostly goes on without conscious awareness’.<sup>534</sup> The paradox here is that the human personality lacks the unity of individual selfhood even while it is alive, which seems to be incompatible with Myers’ hopes for the survival of personhood.<sup>535</sup> For Myers, ‘[h]uman personality was itself a kind of ghost, as systematically elusive as the apparitions that were the objects of Myers’ many years of work in psychical research’.<sup>536</sup> The ‘subliminal self’, that hidden kernel of the person, remains opaque to the individual, despite being the fundamental core of human identity:

The idea of a *threshold* (*limen*, *Schwelle*) of consciousness; — of a level above which sensation or thought must rise before it can enter into our conscious life; — is a simply and familiar one. The word subliminal — meaning ‘beneath that threshold’ — has already been used to define those sensations which are too weak to be individually recognized. I propose to extend the meaning of that term, so as to cover *all* that takes place beneath the ordinary threshold, or say, if preferred, outside the ordinary margin of consciousness...I feel bound to speak of a *subliminal* or *ultra-marginal* consciousness, — a consciousness which we shall see, for instance, uttering or writing sentences quite as complex and coherent as the supraliminal consciousness could make them.<sup>537</sup>

While Myers asserted that the obscure workings of the ‘subliminal self’ unlocked ‘abilities not normally available to the conscious personality, such as telepathy and clairvoyance’,<sup>538</sup> the surrealists’

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<sup>530</sup> Katherine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>532</sup> John Gray, *The Immortalization Commission: The Strange Quest to Cheat Death* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>533</sup> Burke, *Becoming Modern*, p. 144.

<sup>534</sup> Gray, p. 48.

<sup>535</sup> Gray, pp. 49-50.

<sup>536</sup> Gray, p. 50.

<sup>537</sup> F.W Myers qtd. in Gray, p. 48.

<sup>538</sup> F. W Myers qtd. in Gray, p. 49.

embrace of automatism signalled a desire to explore the fundamentally ghostly experience of opening oneself up to whatever might be hidden with the psyche, intentionally putting oneself into a trance state in order to access otherwise repressed thoughts, words, and images buried in the unconscious mind.<sup>539</sup>

Surrealism's attraction to the latent ghostliness of the psyche gave rise to 'the double nature of surrealist perception'.<sup>540</sup> Conley explains that 'anamorphosis functions well as a visual paradigm for this doubleness because of the way Surrealism purports to harness both our conscious and unconscious minds'.<sup>541</sup> Anamorphosis entails doubling. It not only involves seeing an image, an object, a body, or a landscape twice, but seeing it one way the first time, and then another way the second time.<sup>542</sup> This visual 'double take', Conley shows us, was at the heart of what she calls 'Surrealist ghostliness':

Surrealist anamorphosis varies a great deal, from actual anamorphic paintings by Dalí, in which two concurrent images overlap, to much more subtle examples where there are only hints of a double image embedded in the work, such as in Miller's Egyptian landscapes. Anamorphosis is widely present in surrealist art and represents the strongest evidence of Surrealist ghostliness as a unifying phenomenon throughout the movement.<sup>543</sup>

While Conley implies that the doubleness of anamorphosis always refers to the human psyche, I want to extend her remarks beyond the mental realm to include nonhuman life.

*Insel* partakes of the Surrealist fascination with anamorphosis to produce a doubling of the monstrous. The first type of monstrosity is composed of static, misshapen, decayed, inert, and pathological life that seems to be destined for dissolution. This breed of the monstrous lacks vitality and signifies absence of form. It was, furthermore, this version of monstrosity that provoked cultural anxieties about the formlessness and inertia of the degenerate body. While Nazi aesthetics favoured enclosed bodies and organic form, in Hitler's Germany the modernist fascination with fractured and unfinished form became synonymous with death and the destruction of organic wholeness.<sup>544</sup> In line with this eugenicist understanding of the anomalous body, Insel appears to be a mishmash of dead appendages that fail to cohere. For example, we not only learn that his 'pate [is] too loosely attached', but also 'that the gutter of his upper lip was interrupted by a seam'.<sup>545</sup> In contrast, the second type of monstrosity has a more positive valence in that it generates an excess of life and continual metamorphosis. The emphasis on the generation of new forms in this second strain of monstrosity aligns it with a Romantic conception of the monstrous rooted in philosophical vitalism. According to Denise Gigante:

[T]he aesthetic category of monstrosity intersected with natural philosophy around the turn of the nineteenth century, transforming the idea of the monster as a static deformity or collection of poorly assembled parts into a distinctly

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<sup>539</sup> Conley, p. 3.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15.

<sup>544</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, pp. 28-40.

<sup>545</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 111.

Romantic, vitalist conception of monstrosity as too much life. Linked to process rather than product, to formative power rather than malformation, the objectified monster gave way to a monstrous vitality that was frightening in its assertion of unbounded purpose.<sup>546</sup>

Insel's metamorphoses transmute the static human form to merge with animals, machines, and monsters in a relentless process of transformation. Monstrosity generates new and unforeseen forms of life, often by melding together human and non-mammalian bodies. For example, Loy describes Insel as a bird 'growing feathers',<sup>547</sup> as 'insectile',<sup>548</sup> and even 'a creature of the deep sea'.<sup>549</sup> In addition, Insel's propensity to 'gnaw' on bones with 'bestial satisfaction'<sup>550</sup> contribute to the impression that he is 'no longer human'.<sup>551</sup> As well as inhabiting an interstitial zone between the human and the animal, Insel vacillates between movement and stasis, animacy and inanimacy, generation and degeneration. But his oscillation between 'arrested development'<sup>552</sup> and 'unusual liveliness' does not mean that the animate and the inanimate are stable categories in the novel.<sup>553</sup> If Jones sees Insel's decomposing body as an 'animate cadaver', then this nod to the living dead erodes the divide between animate and inanimate matter.<sup>554</sup> Insel is posthumous. Lifeless. Decomposing. Yet, in spite of his status as a figure shrouded in death, he is nonetheless a *medium* who (like cinematic medium) 'animates the inanimate'.<sup>555</sup> As Deleuze writes of Expressionist horror in *Cinema 1*,

automata, robots and puppets are no longer mechanisms [...] but somnambulists, zombies or golems who express the intensity of [...] non-organic life: not simply Wegener's *The Golem*, but also the Gothic horror film of around 1930, for example Whale's *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein* and Halperin's *White Zombie*.<sup>556</sup>

In addition to being a living corpse, Insel imbues his visions of unformed life with an anomalous vitality. Eugene Thacker's claim that 'the living dead are driven by an ambiguous vitalism' captures this strange coalescence of the life and nonlife.<sup>557</sup> Indeed, for Jones these images of primordial life give access to 'the procreational chaotic vapour in which all things may begin to grow'.<sup>558</sup> The association between Insel's decay and the recurrent tropes of emergent life reveal a prodigious entanglement of vitality and death. Life and nonlife do not exist as mutually

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<sup>546</sup> Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 210.

<sup>547</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 115.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>555</sup> Powell, p. 27.

<sup>556</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum-Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 57.

<sup>557</sup> Eugene Thacker, 'Nekros; or, the Poetics of Biopolitics' in *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sarah Juliet Lauro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 361-380 (p. 378).

<sup>558</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 43.

exclusive states of matter. Rather, they blend and intermingle in material flows of generation and degeneration. Insel's living body becomes inanimate, whilst his corpse displays an ability to vitalize images of 'germinal life'.<sup>559</sup>

*Insel* enquires into Surrealism's abiding fascination with the monstrous. It was Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868) that encouraged Surrealist attempts to marry occultism with aesthetic monstrosity.<sup>560</sup> Eugene Thacker posits that *Malodoror* manifests 'a focus on the form-giving and form-generating process in life-forms, taken to its extreme in many cases of monstrous metamorphoses'.<sup>561</sup> He sketches out two aesthetic styles of metamorphosis — anamorphosis and 'amorphosis' (or formlessness) — undergone by the novel's monstrous parade of human and animal bodies.<sup>562</sup> Thacker sketches out the various meanings of anamorphosis:

Although the term anamorphosis has a double meaning — in art history to describe a visual illusion, and in biology to describe the development of embryonic life forms — I am using the term to describe a breaking-down of form and the forming capacity. Thus *ana - morphosis* is, in this sense, a literal layering of negative form (*ana* — "back," "reversion," "again") on top of existing form (*morphē*, "shape," "form").<sup>563</sup>

Taken together, these definitions provide an entry point into Loy's evident fascination with ideas of turning backwards (or reversion), embryonic life, and the undoing of form. As we have seen in *Insel*, Loy links atavism or evolutionary regression to the Surrealist trope of anamorphosis or the blurring of representational forms. If we turn from *Insel* to her earlier poem sequence 'Songs to Joannes', we find the juxtaposition of 'dorsal vertebrae' with the lines

turning  
To the antipodean  
and Form    a blurr.<sup>564</sup>

In this fragment, backwardness ('dorsal vertebrae') implies the distorting of living form by turning evolution in the diametrically opposed direction ('turning/ To the antipodean'). As in *Insel*, Loy's imagines poetic making in 'Songs to Joannes' as a creative turn towards new forms that is also a *return* or reversion; and the idea of 'turning' connotes, in this context, a trope (Greek *treipein*, 'to turn') or poetic figure, which invites us to read Loy's language as a poetics of anamorphosis or, in Thacker's phrase, 'a breaking-down of form'.<sup>565</sup> While the blank space between 'Form' and 'a blurr' provides a visual analogy for the negation of poetic form, the hybrid creatures in 'Songs to Joannes' suggest a blurring of the distinction between the animals,

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<sup>559</sup> For a discussion of 'germinal life' in Bergson's philosophy, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, 'Bergson and Creative Evolution/Involution' in *The New Bergson*, ed. by John Mullarkey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 146-167.

<sup>560</sup> Thacker, 'Apophatic Animality', p. 85.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>564</sup> Loy, 'Songs to Joannes', p. 65.

<sup>565</sup> For a discussion of the interrelation of poesis and monstrosity in *Maldoror*, see Thacker, 'Apophatic Animality', pp.90-91.



humans, and gods. For example, her invocation of the monstrous ‘Pig Cupid’ turns animality into divinity, the ideal into the abject, spirit into matter. This hybridization of different bodies erodes ontological hierarchies, and topples the masterful human subject from its privileged perch, at least insofar as this privilege rests on the idea of ‘Man’ as the sole possessor of language and signification. Loy’s speaker not only invokes animalised deities, but also calls on the impersonal forces of evolution to deprive the human of language:

Unnatural selection  
Breed such sons and daughters  
As shall jibber at each other  
Unintepretable cryptonyms.<sup>566</sup>

The phrase ‘Unnatural selection’, which negates the Darwinian natural order with intimations of the monstrous, is the addressee of the speaker’s request for a posterity without language. We can read this entreaty to evolutionary forces as a call to annihilate human voice and signification:

Give them some way of braying brassily  
For a caressive calling  
Or to homophonous hiccoughs.<sup>567</sup>

Here, Loy implies a yearning for the ascendancy of animal noise (‘braying’) over human speech. This self-cancelling plea for the silencing of human language is the flip-side of the speaker’s sardonic anti-humanism: ‘Proto-plasm was raving mad/ Evolving us’.<sup>568</sup>

While we have seen that Insel’s body is anamorphic in the aesthetic sense of that term, I want to suggest that the embryonic forms that he projects from his body showcase anamorphous specimens of biological life. Changes in perspective produce the morphing of his species identity, such that he becomes ‘hauntingly animal, even insectile’ when ‘cut into profile’.<sup>569</sup> Meanwhile, his fusion of the atavistic and embryonic suggests that he has not developed into an enclosed organism: he is ‘made of the first quivering jelly under the sun’.<sup>570</sup> Both in aesthetic and in biological terms, Loy often characterises Insel’s anamorphic body as self-differentiating and unfinished. Her fascination with the idea of inconclusive form accounts for her focus on questions of life, generation, mobility, and unfinished form in her interpretations of the work her modernist peers. Indeed, if we keep in our minds the various meanings of the term charted by Thacker, I propose that Loy construed modernist aesthetics as fundamentally anamorphic in their aesthetic orientation. She explains that modern artists deform the ‘coherence of our customary vision’ in order to ‘liberate art from [...] a final pictorial conclusion’.<sup>571</sup> For Loy, the ‘elemental form’ of Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture

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<sup>566</sup> Loy, ‘Songs to Joannes’, p. 65.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>569</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 83.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>571</sup> Mina Loy, ‘The Metaphysical Pattern in Aesthetics’ in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, ed. by Sara Crangle (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), 263-264 (pp. 263-264).

suggests ‘form arrested at its very inception — a certain *élan* of primary embodiment’.<sup>572</sup> Loy’s sense of the implication of the embryonic and the elemental articulates a turning away from completed form back towards the more primordial forces that shape matter.

Is *Insel* a vitalist text? There are good reasons for answering this question affirmatively. First, Jones makes it plain she disapproves of Insel’s penchant for automatism — and (if we discount the biographical fallacy for a moment) this antipathy to automatism dovetails with Loy’s Bergsonism and her ensuing disdain for mechanized life. Needless to say, automatism was the formative device in the Surrealist *agon* with the conscious will and agency of the rational mind. The act of artistic creation becomes machine-like, reduced to an automatic reflex, which means in turn that the agency of the creative ‘genius’ becomes unnecessary to artistic production, so that intentional artistry can be relinquished altogether (or held at bay by inducing altered states of consciousness).<sup>573</sup> Second, to read *Insel* is to find oneself absorbed in a hallucinatory realm of continual metamorphosis characterised by an abundance of different forms of life. For this reason, Loy’s lyrical images of pre-human (or even pre-organic) life forms links with Thacker’s notion of a ‘*metaphysics of generosity and prodigality*, a vitalist ontology of fecund forms that constantly proliferate, generate, and change’.<sup>574</sup> Thacker aligns this vitalist ontology of the monstrous with Gaston Bachelard’s remarks about the ‘bliss of metamorphosis’ in his 1939 study *Lautréamont*. Thacker explains that Bachelard avows the creativity, the unceasing novelty, of living forms; more, his reading implies that the ‘bliss of metamorphosis [...] is ultimately recognized to be as spiritual as it is animal’.<sup>575</sup> But if Jones wants to ‘forget all form’ in order to ‘draw forth incipient form’, then this production of form involves a nullification of existing forms.<sup>576</sup> Jones’s desire to bring forth ‘incipient form’, which springs from a Bergsonian investment in ‘germinal life’, implies that creativity resides in a kind of aesthetic amnesia rather than active creation.

There is no reason to doubt that Loy’s vitalist disdain for the mechanical motivates her dramatization of Insel’s automatisms. But is her engagement with media technologies compatible with a Bergsonian critique of the machine in general and cinema in particular? My proposal is that Loy’s sensitivity to the nonhuman perceptual worlds of new broadcast media has implications for our enquiry into her backward-facing posthumanism. Jussi Parikka explains that ‘the broadcasting era since the 1910s and 1920s envisioned the dead, the absent and the alien on the wires, or the oceanic waves of wireless transmission’.<sup>577</sup> As Parikka further suggests:

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<sup>572</sup> Mina Loy, ‘Brancusi and the Ocean’ in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, ed. by Sara Crangle (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), 221–222 (p. 221).

<sup>573</sup> For a discussion of the conflict between Loy’s investment in artistic autonomy and the Surrealist promotion of automatism, see Hayden, *Curious Disciplines*, p. 146.

<sup>574</sup> Thacker, ‘Apophatic Animality’, p. 92.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>576</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 20.

<sup>577</sup> Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 55.

[R]emove the supposedly fantastic or otherworldly, and see what is revealed: a world of social relations, networks of communication, and new worlds of media technologies which *are* non-human in the deep scientific sense of reaching out to non-phenomenological worlds of electricity, electromagnetic fields and, a bit later for example, quantum physics.<sup>578</sup>

In *Insel*, Loy imagines media technologies as machines that give humans access to inhuman perceptions. In contrast to Bergson's anti-cinematic prejudice in *Creative Evolution*, Loy invites us to participate in the durations showcased by Insel's 'conjunctive power of projecting images'.<sup>579</sup> When Insel becomes a medium transmitting images of atavistic life that open up durations beyond the human, Jones commends these cinematic projections; they enable her to feel 'the profound relief of the acute celerity rhythm that perpetually disintegrated me as I got out of watching a film in slow motion'.<sup>580</sup> Film conveys rhythmic intensities that 'disintegrate' the enclosed body by exposing it to inhuman speeds and slownesses. *Insel* showcases the transformational and monstrous potentialities that reside in the body-as-medium. To this end, Loy conceives the 'soft machine' as a living, changing thing by demonstrating its ability to animate primordial forms of life as they begin to take shape.<sup>581</sup> Insel is a medium in that his machine body enables Jones to perceive flickering, insubstantial images of elemental life. The 'vibratory flux' of this embryonic growth eludes definitive form.<sup>582</sup> It precedes individuation.

With respect to broadcast technologies, Jones does not distinguish human communication (between herself and Insel) from nonhuman transmissions (between media technologies). As Andrew Gaedtke puts it: 'Jones experiences a magnetic pull towards Insel, a strange attraction that is coded in the discourses of modern mechanization and new media'.<sup>583</sup> Thus, she describes her intimate relationship with Insel in terms of the 'telepathic, televisual machinery of our reciprocity'.<sup>584</sup> This identification of human bodies with media technologies is most evident in descriptions of Insel as a *dead medium*: 'It was remarkable that he should succeed in speaking — his body no longer showed much signs of life. He might be using this body [...] as a medium, from a distance to which his fluctuant spirit had been temporarily released'.<sup>585</sup> Insel's nonliving body receives signals automatically like a machine, not a human mind. As Gaedtke notes, 'Myers' work offers a likely source for the notion that the delusional experiences of Insel and Jones might not simply be pathological breakdowns, but signal new forms of sensitivity to questions of being and time'.<sup>586</sup> As John Durham Peters observes, 'The spiritualist quest for communiqués from distant minds sent together with the shrinkage of the

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>579</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 34.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>583</sup> Andrew Gaedtke, 'From Transmissions of Madness to Machines of Writing: Mina Loy's *Insel* as Clinical Fantasy', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.1 (Fall 2008), 143-162 (p. 145).

<sup>584</sup> Loy, *Insel*, p. 143.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>586</sup> Gaedtke, p. 156.

notion of communication to mean intentional sendings among humans'.<sup>587</sup> Insel, in his role as medium, then, does not fulfil the nineteenth-century spiritualist conception of the medium as a 'person communicating meanings that were distinctly human — that is, located in minds (whether incarnate or not)'.<sup>588</sup> The important distinction here is that between an anthropocentric idea of the medium as a living human receiving messages dead humans on the one hand and a non-anthropocentric idea of medium as 'an element, environment, or vehicle in the middle of things' on the other.<sup>589</sup> While the spiritualist medium reanimated the human voices of the dead, Insel is akin to a non-anthropocentric medium that relays elemental forces from the inhuman environment.

Since the monstrous body is often attributed with qualities of both weakness and recalcitrance—such as vulnerability and disobedience to the disciplinary measures that enforce the norms of the modern body—it therefore deviates from the masculinist ideal of Enlightenment subjectivity. Monstrosity is in this sense the repressed double of modernity's fantasies of the autonomous subject. Yet this repressed body returns in Loy's grotesque modernism; not as an unassimilable 'other' to be derided or venerated but as an integral (though anxiety-producing) component of the self which demands recognition. Towards the end of *Insel*, Jones comes precariously close to relinquishing her separate and bounded identity, taking on several of Insel's anomalous characteristics. Her increasing fragility mirrors the monstrous incongruities of Insel's body, as if her very being has become contaminated by his troubling ambiguity. For instance, Jones feels that she has become 'unnatural' and that her body is fragmenting: 'my confines broke down', she explains, 'I lost contour'.<sup>590</sup> In surrendering her self-identical form, Jones becomes a *doppelgänger* of her monstrous companion. She describes how the day after having 'unexpectedly disintegrated' her face 'looked "destroyed" like Insel's'.<sup>591</sup> Here, Jones's transformation into the monstrous other becomes explicit: the caregiver/invalid and normal/abnormal binaries that have thus far structured their relationship have completely broken down. In this way, Loy acknowledges the fragility of the boundary between 'normal' and 'abnormal' embodiment. Ultimately, Jones decides to break off her relationship with Insel in order to halt her own physical and mental deterioration. Insel's arrested artistic development — as well as his inability to manage his own body — symbolise the stasis and inertia that Jones must repudiate in order to move forward with her own artistic production. Finally then, Jones rejects Insel's aesthetics of monstrosity; yet I would suggest that an aesthetics of monstrosity is partly recuperated in Loy's novelistic form. After all, *Insel's* oscillations between different aesthetic registers — sublime transcendence and abject

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<sup>587</sup> John Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 48.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>590</sup> Loy, *Insel*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid, p. 127-128.

materiality, fascination and repulsion, creativity and stasis — certainly parallels the instability of Insel's monstrous body.

### **The Monster in the Mirror: 'Chiffon Velours' and 'An Aged Woman'**

In a similar way to *Insel*, some of Loy's late poems explore the possibility that the normal/abnormal division is destabilised by the vulnerability of all bodily existence. Her 1947 poem 'Chiffon Velours', for instance, describes the diminishing physique of an ageing woman in terms that echo Insel's disappearing body: The site of vanished breasts/ Is marked by a safety pin.<sup>592</sup> If breasts are a synecdoche for the fecundity of the female reproductive body, the pins described in Loy's poem mark the absence of the bodily generativity celebrated in 'Parturition'; indeed, the past tense of 'vanished' suggests an indelible disappearance of the maternal body's productivity. It is as if absence defines the body of the woman described in the poem. Like Insel, the vanishing body depicted in 'Chiffon Velours' belongs to a figure considered abject by normative culture; ageing and socially disqualified, she exists beyond the limits of the acceptable body as defined by the consumerist culture she is marginalised by (but which she nonetheless precariously inhabits). Moreover, her precarious hold on life — or proximity to death — compounds her abjection. Loy describes her as 'sere', which suggests both wrinkled skin and the withering of organic matter. Strikingly, however, the poem suggests that the speaker may not be as different from this abject figure as we might expect:

Trimmed with one sudden burst  
of flowery cotton  
half her black skirt glows as a soiled mirror;  
reflects the gutter—  
a yard of chiffon velours<sup>593</sup>

Of the phrase 'soiled mirror', Amy Morris astutely observes that 'the speaker recognise[s] herself in the woman' described in the poem.<sup>594</sup> As in *Insel*, the non-normate body becomes an object of scopophilic fascination because of its abjection, yet there is a moment of reversal in which the abject body is nonetheless revealed as a reflection of the self; in this way, the abnormal/normal boundary is shown to designate fluid states of embodiment rather than fixed eugenicist divisions between fit and degenerate types. Similarly, in 'An Aged Woman', a mirrored image unsettles the distinction between self and other, normal and abnormal:

Does you mirror Bedevil you  
or is the impossible  
possible to senility  
enabling the erstwhile agile  
narrow silhouette of self  
to hold in huge reserve

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<sup>592</sup> Mina Loy, 'Chiffon Velours' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 119 (p. 119).

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> Amy Morris, "'You should have disappeared years ago' — the poetics of cultural disappearance in Mina Loy's late poems', *Critical Quarterly*, 55.2 (July 2013), 81-104 (p. 88).

this excessive incognito  
 of a Bulbous stranger  
 only to be exorcised by death<sup>595</sup>

Here, a series of verbal oppositions—‘impossible/possible’, ‘ex’-cessive/ ‘in’-cognito—speak to the tension between self and otherness, inside and outside, which the ‘aged woman’ of the poem experiences when viewing her mirrored image. By addressing herself in the second person, the poem’s speaker enacts the de-familiarisation of individual selfhood that the ‘Bulbous stranger’ in the mirror so graphically represents. Becoming her own monstrous double, the speaker addresses her reflection as if it were another; yet the strange double can ‘only be exorcised by death’, which suggests in turn that the gap between self and abject other has completely closed.

Loy’s articulation of the vulnerable body repudiates the ‘technologically hardened’ body of Italian futurism and, furthermore, challenges the normal/abnormal divide that enables modern biopolitics. The relationship between atavism and creativity in Loy’s writing implies an ambivalent relationship to the anti-normative body. In her later writing, Loy moves away from the eugenicist commitment to corporeal improvement that underwrites her ‘maternalist’ bodily poetics of the 1910s. Her late poems about ageing women acknowledge that the normal/abnormal dichotomy is not fixed; hence rigid categories such as ‘degenerate’ that Loy uses in her eugenicist statements lose their validity as stable markers of identity in her later writing. Just as Jones becomes a *doppelgänger* of the monstrous Insel, the non-normative bodies that the speakers of ‘Chiffon Velours’ and ‘An Aged Woman’ see in the mirror suggest that the ‘aberrant’ body does not always belong to the other. Nonetheless, it is not an exaggeration to say that in these later works the vulnerable body often undergoes a process of aesthetic sublimation. ‘Casting nonnormative embodiment as a degraded state’, Maren Linett writes, ‘many twentieth century artworks nevertheless suggest that this degradation can be transcended through the superiority of modernist art’.<sup>596</sup> To some extent, Loy finds value in the weak and vulnerable body only to the extent that, as Julia Kristeva puts it, ‘The abject is edged with the sublime’.<sup>597</sup> To be sure, Loy’s commitment to artistic sublimation does not involve a straightforward repudiation of the impaired body’s recalcitrant materiality and contingency; yet, in the end, Loy places limits on the value of non-normate bodies to the extent that they feature in her later work as abject foils to aesthetic sublimation. They are the abject stuff that is sublated by the alchemical transmutation of profane matter into sublime art. I have also argued that, in *Insel*, Loy’s thematic interest in non-normate bodies is paralleled by her modernist experiments with novelistic form. Yet this relationship cannot be construed as an entirely enabling one: there is a sense in which Loy’s shuttling between the registers of sublime

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<sup>595</sup> Mina Loy, ‘An Aged Woman’ in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger Conover (Carcanet: Manchester, 1997), 145 (p. 145).

<sup>596</sup> Linett, p. 146.

<sup>597</sup> Kristeva, p. 11.

abstraction and abject materiality is predicated on imputing a profane ‘negativity’ to nonstandard embodiment. The ‘negative’ ground of the non-normate body—whether in the form of monstrosity, homelessness, addiction or disability—is the abject matter that Loy’s art transmutes into modernist form. Thus, for Loy the value of corporeal vulnerability resides in the artist’s creation of ‘new aesthetic domains out of the encounter with non-normative bodies’<sup>598</sup>. In *Insel*, Jones—and the narrative itself—rejects the hyperbolic monstrosity of Insel’s body. It is as if Jones’s repudiation of Insel’s physical inconsistency is the necessary condition for her production of the novel: Jones refuses to submit to corporeal disintegration because it stalls the possibility of aesthetic creation. In order to mature as an artist, Jones must reject Insel’s monstrously arrested development.

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<sup>598</sup> Janet Lyon, ‘On the Asylum Road With Woolf and Mew’, *Modernism/modernity*, 18.3 (2012), 551-574 (p. 561). Note: Lyon’s essay explores the link between formal innovation and encounters with disability in Woolf and Mew, but her theory modernists create ‘new aesthetic domains out of the encounter with non-normate bodies and affects’ applies to modernist literature more widely.

### CHAPTER THREE: 'NO HUMAN SHAPE': UNFORMED LIFE IN SAMUEL BECKETT

#### Introduction: Texts Against Life

Given that the 'turn to life' in the humanities has begun to provoke counterblasts from scholars in fields as diverse as queer theory and ecological studies, Beckett's anti-vitalist modernism may be timelier than ever. In the introduction to their 2016 collection *Against Life*, Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood write that [t]he negative critique of life' that inspired their volume could be traced back to the 'queer-inflected thought' of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman.<sup>599</sup> This well-established current of 'queer misanthropy', which has been retroactively associated with the 'anti-social turn' in queer theory, has not gone unremarked in Beckett Studies.<sup>600</sup> Conceptions of 'queer-inflected' anti-natalism drawn from Edelman's *No Future* (2004) have generated new perspectives on Beckett's animus against life.<sup>601</sup> From the standpoint of Edelman's fierce assault on 'reproductive futurism', disclaiming 'life' is consistent with a queer resistance to the sacred imperatives of heteronormative culture.<sup>602</sup> Life's value is dependent on its arrival in futurity, yet this arrival will occur in any present to come, not just because the future never arrives, but because the compulsory deferral of life's value is the driving force of 'reproductive futurism'. Accordingly, Edelman situates his anti-natalist polemic in opposition to 'the conservative politics that compel us to respect life, to preserve it, and perpetuate it'.<sup>603</sup> Beckett gives an indirect demonstration of his own counter-vital credentials in *Mercier and Camier*, where we encounter Watt (in a cameo appearance) getting himself thrown out of a pub after, first, yelling 'Bugger life'<sup>604</sup>, and then upping the ante with the more succinct locution: 'Fuck life'.<sup>605</sup> As the phrase 'bugger life' implies, there is a certain 'queer negativity' behind the Beckettian injunction to take sides against the living. Crucially, this stubborn refusal to identify with the vital pulse of life as the final guarantee of meaning and value links with his counter-vitalist aesthetic. After all, the invective against 'life' that spices his texts joins with his depictions of ailing and exhausted bodies in a mutually reinforcing negation of the vitalist ethos. In biographical terms, of course, Beckett's fascination with the

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<sup>599</sup> Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood, 'Introduction' in *Against Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 3-40 (p.19).

<sup>600</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 213.

<sup>601</sup> For a discussion of Beckett's critique of 'reproductive futurism' in the context of Irish politics of reproduction, see Seán Kennedy, 'First Love: Abortion and Infanticide in Beckett and Yeats', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 22 (2010), pp. 79-91.

<sup>602</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>603</sup> Lee Edelman, 'Afterword' in *Against Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 269-274 (p. 271).

<sup>604</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, ed. by Seán Kennedy (London: Faber, 2010), p. 94.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.



counter-vital is traceable to his childhood obsession with collecting stones. According to James Knowlson, '[l]ater in life, he came to rationalise this concern as the manifestation of an early fascination with the mineral, with things dying and decaying, with petrification. He linked this interest with Sigmund Freud's view that human beings have a prebirth nostalgia to return to the mineral state'.<sup>606</sup> On this biographical level, Beckett's refusal of the imperative to affirm life seems to be nothing more than a psychological idiosyncrasy. And yet as Andrew Gibson reminds us in his discussion of Beckett's anti-life sentiments: 'There have been many life-haters. But since they have known life only in and as particular historical occasions, they have always hated particular historical versions of life, even when they have asserted the opposite'.<sup>607</sup> 'As Foucault above all instructed us', Gibson writes, 'the *bios* is always historical'.<sup>608</sup> The rejection of life in Beckett's fiction goes hand in hand with the insistent anti-normative tone of his writing, endowing his contestation of the historical norms of life with a wilful and unyielding perversity. This perversity finds expression not only in his refusal of normalizing discourses of wholeness and reproduction but also in his work's incompatibility with affirmative or progressive political projects. In the first section of this chapter, I argue that Beckett's self-identification with the 'counter-vital' trajectory of the death drive informs his engagement with decadent aesthetics and the medical discourse of degeneration and eugenics. After a brief discussion of atavism and posture in *Molloy* I situate Beckett's post-war fiction in relation to Nationalist Socialist theories of art and eugenics, arguing that his incorporation of deformity into his writing contests the biopolitical paradigm in which aesthetic form gives value to life.

To appreciate the significance of Beckett's animosity towards life, we must first understand the modernist attempt to rethink the life/death binary. Erin E. Edwards, in her brilliant study, *The Modernist Corpse: Posthumanism and the Posthumous* (2018), revivifies our understanding of the boundary between life and death in literary modernism by shining the scholar's lamp on the posthumous agencies of the modernist corpse. As Edwards puts it: 'Far from signifying the mortal limits of the human, the corpse in modernism functions "autopoietically" as a generative site from which to rewrite the living body and its relation to putatively dead or lifeless things'.<sup>609</sup> Her genealogy of the modernist corpse takes its theoretical bearings from Rosi Braidotti's materialist posthumanism:

Braidotti's call for a vitalist reconceptualization of death reorients [Giorgio] Agamben's emphasis on the foundational role of "bare life," which inevitably locates the biological continuum of *zoë* "on the horizon of death, or the liminal state of non-life." [...] For Braidotti, this conception of bare life precludes other engagements with *zoë* and has generated in recent social and theoretical discourse a "forensic turn" that defined the subject solely through the "horizon of death" —

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<sup>606</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury 2007), p. 29.

<sup>607</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Edwards, *The Modernist Corpse*, p. 3.

through its finitude rather than its becoming. Braidotti's reconceptualization of death instead theorizes the posthuman through its embedded relations with *zoë*, shifting political discourse away from an almost singular emphasis on "wound and loss".<sup>610</sup>

The modernist corpse is an anticipatory figure in that its posthumous vitalities prefigure the breakdown of the dichotomy of life and nonlife in contemporary posthumanist thought. Posthumanist recalibrations of death insist on unbinding the ties between death and negativity. As Braidotti suggests, 'We need to re-think death, the ultimate subtraction, as another phase in the generative process'.<sup>611</sup> Such a rethinking of death, then, questions the rhetoric of finitude and affirms a neovitalist concept of impersonal life. Unbounded life exceeds the limited vitality of the individualised body, which, for Braidotti, means that the death of the monadic individual contributes to the intensification of *zoe*. Before the advent of work in posthumanist literary studies such as *The Modernist Corpse*, critics had acknowledged that canonical modernist texts take a step in this direction. Harry Staten, for example, writes of 'the will to live-die' in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'the individual life ceases, and yet the process of "(de)composition" goes on (this is Bloom's vision in Hades). The decomposition of the individual body and its incorporation into the transindividual organic cycle mark the limit of what the Western philosophical tradition can understand and assimilate'.<sup>612</sup> The vitalist dimension of this posthumanist attempt to think beyond death as an unsurpassable limit or negation of life implies what Eugene Thacker calls a 'metaphysics of generosity, a commitment to a first principle of generation, fecundity, and affirmation'.<sup>613</sup>

The undoing of the life/death binary in posthumanist thought maps onto a reading of degeneration as a *generative* process which introduces alterity and becoming into forms of life that have become static because of the enforcement of fixed norms. As Roberto Esposito suggests, 'degeneration [...] isn't only negative [...] but rather assumes and valorizes the different, the dissimilar and the abnormal inasmuch as they are innovative and transformative powers of reality'.<sup>614</sup> While the decomposition of organic matter fosters the continuation of the life cycle, degeneration is not a sickness unto death but a vital process that generates unforeseen forms. This dual insight runs like a *leitmotif* through the Joycean corpus, in which, as Staten puts it (referring to *Ulysses* in particular), the 'degradation of the logos' and the 'becoming-feces of the human body' provide 'the ground of a profligate generation of new forms'.<sup>615</sup> Beckett acknowledges this feature of Joyce's Viconian aesthetic in his essay 'Dante...Bruno, Vico...Joyce': 'The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical: in

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

<sup>612</sup> Henry Staten, 'The Decomposing Form of Joyce's *Ulysses*', PMLA, 112. 3 (May 1997), 380-392 (p. 381).

<sup>613</sup> Thacker, 'Apophatic Animality', p. 90.

<sup>614</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, pp. 123- 124.

<sup>615</sup> Staten, *The Decomposing Form*, p. 381.

principle, corruption is generation'.<sup>616</sup> Joyce's affirmation of the agency of decomposing matter parallels his hostility to the eugenicist idea that nonstandard bodies represent immobility, passivity anti-futurity, or even mortality itself. The degenerate life of the non-normative body, as this was understood in Nazi eugenics, represented 'an existence without life'.<sup>617</sup> As a harbinger of sterility and death, the degenerate body is reduced to formless waste matter that has no future. Joyce inverts this formula: as Marion Quirici has pointed out, 'Joyce demonstrates the potential for disability aesthetics to assert the generativity of deviant bodies'.<sup>618</sup> Maren Tova Linett echoes and extends this point: 'In the "Shem the Penman" chapter of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce takes his literary experimentation to a new extreme, revaluing the deformed body as the body of the modernist text'.<sup>619</sup> She explains that in this chapter the 'dysgenic body' becomes a source of artistic creation and animating vitality:

In book 1, chapter 7, "Shem the Penman," and to some degree in book 3, chapter 1, "Shaun the Post," Joyce depicts the writer as disabled, degenerate, and dysgenic. But as the writer of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, he also functions as a creator, a life-giver. Indeed, "Shem the Penman" ends by asserting that Shem "lifts the lifewand and the dumb speak". In *Finnegans Wake*, therefore, the devaluation of disability is overturned, the strong Aryan body of Shaun is seen as brutish and oppressive, and the racialized, disabled, dysgenic body of Shem is celebrated as the source of art and life.<sup>620</sup>

While Joyce 'overturns' the hierarchy of 'dysgenic' and 'eugenics' bodies, Beckett negates the normative valuation of life that governs this distinction in the first place. Unlike the life-giving and form-giving body of Shem, Beckett's degenerates do not contribute to a 'celebration of deformity as modernism' that affirms the anti-normative body as an excess or abundance of life.<sup>621</sup> Rather, he focuses on the degenerate body insofar as it signifies the connection between the anti-vital and the temporality of backwardness.

### **Beckett, Decadence and Degeneration**

In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2016), Vincent Sherry argues that Edelman's analysis of queerness as a refusal of 'the modern ideology of progressive time' aligns queer anti-futurity with 'the temporal imaginary of decadence'.<sup>622</sup> For Sherry, 'there is a fundamental connection between queerness, which has been assigned to decadence as its most vivid interest (its most livid identity), and the denial of futurity, that is, with the imaginary circumstance of aftermath'.<sup>623</sup> Sherry invokes 'lateness' and the worn-out time of 'aftermath' as the *genii loci*

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<sup>616</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>617</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 134.

<sup>618</sup> Marion Quirici, 'Degeneration, Decadence, and Joyce's Modernist Disability Aesthetics', *Joyce Studies Annual*, (2016), 84-109 (p. 104).

<sup>619</sup> Linett, p. 145.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid*, p. 183.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.

<sup>622</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 25-26.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

of the ‘temporal imaginary of decadence’ — and he includes Beckett among his cast of modernists who write in the key of decadence.<sup>624</sup> But the intersection of aesthetic decadence with the Freudian death drive is not restricted to questions of temporality. For example, Peter Nicholls argues that Paul Bourget’s well-known definition of decadent form ‘confirms our understanding of the death-drive within decadent style’.<sup>625</sup> ‘A decadent style’, Bourget writes in his famous 1881 essay on Baudelaire,

is one in which the unity of the book decomposes to leave room for the independence of the page, the page decomposes to leave room for the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to leave room for the independence of the word’.<sup>626</sup>

Decomposing wholes into parts with no unifying principle to hold them together, the degenerate artist paradoxically creates aesthetic form by misshaping and distorting it. In this way, Bourget’s analysis of stylistic decomposition reveals that aesthetic decadence is a kind of ‘creative destruction’. Decadent form aspires to an exquisite undoing of form. It is form in the process of decomposing — but without thereby becoming formless. It thus represents a kind of negative morphology, whereby formation and deformation are not so much two distinct processes as they are a singular activity of aesthetic de-composition. This paradoxical conception of generating form through its degeneration proposes that decadent form unfolds *in time*. And this in turn means that the temporality of decadence, rather being extraneous to the question of form, has a defining significance in the process of its decomposition, so that the reciprocity of time and form should be the heart of any analysis of aesthetic decadence. Decadent form is, then, not (necessarily) fixed or petrified, for, according to Bourget’s definition, it shifts from a condition of greater unity towards a condition of greater fragmentation. But the question is: how might we articulate the temporality of this decomposing form? It would not be possible to trace this decomposition in a linear fashion as a *progressive loss of form*: after all, decadent form is by no means formless. According to any of the canonical definitions it is excessively stylised and highly wrought. This means that the undoing of form suggested by Bourget’s term ‘decomposition’ is in fact a way of talking about composing more complex varieties of form. These preliminary reflections on artistic decadence as *formative deformation* invite us to think about aesthetic decomposition otherwise than as an absence of form. And they invite us to think, too, of an art of deformation in ways which would not be compatible with, say, readings of modernism that take their cue from George Bataille’s well-worn conception of the ‘formless’.<sup>627</sup>

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid, pp. 285-287.

<sup>625</sup> Nicholls, p. 60.

<sup>626</sup> Paul Bourget qtd. in Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 76.

<sup>627</sup> See, for example, Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

To further explore this defining paradox of decadent decomposition I want to address Dana Seitler's elegant work on the temporal paradoxes of atavism. In her study *Atavistic Tendencies* (2008), Dana Seitler demonstrates that atavism is a particularly complex idea: it suggests both human-animal hybridity and the relinquishing of human identity altogether, both the undoing of linear time and evolutionary throwbacks obstructing to the irresistible march of progress. She argues that the idea of atavism 'disallows the modern construction of time as a unity that can be distinguished from a stable, archaic past'.<sup>628</sup> Contrariwise, atavism 'offers up a notion of time as multidirectional and of the body as polytemporal'.<sup>629</sup> At face value, atavism contests any simple idea of time moving in a straight line from past to present, primitive to civilized, animal to human. As Seitler has shown, Max Nordau's account of the atavistic traces of pre-human animality that remain lodged in the degenerate body suggests a polychronic relation between past, present, and future.<sup>630</sup> When these discrepant temporalities tangle and collide in unpredictable ways they likewise misshape our conceptions of time. One result of this chronological entanglement is to undermine the notion of form as a self-sufficient unity located in a homogeneous temporal continuum. This is why the fin-de-siècle discourse of degeneration viewed atavism as a threat to 'reproductive futurism' and the progressive time of modernity: 'Male and female reproductive bodies were seen as a function of time: the healthy body of the future, the unhealthy body of the past'.<sup>631</sup> Furthermore, the regressive form of the atavistic body was seen as 'a rupture of the "master narratives" of the modern that dictate a more complete separation of temporal spheres'.<sup>632</sup> The decomposition of decadent form likewise relies on the deforming irruption of the past in the present. In his *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (2016), Ben Hutchinson takes the measure of this polychronic dimension of decadence when he writes: 'Decadent lateness is trapped [...] in the hermeneutic regime of the past — even if that entrapment become, in turn, its own regime—and is defined by its inability to imagine new orders, rather than simply pushing existing categories ever further'.<sup>633</sup> Faced with the impossibility of breaking with the past the decadent writer 'pushes existing categories even further'. It is as if the absence of futurity provokes the decadent artist to obsessively revise and disintegrate the forms of the past.

How does the anti-futurity of the atavistic body relate to queer temporality of the death drive? Edelman claims that 'the death drive is what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability'.<sup>634</sup> In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, however, homosexuality was included within the broader category of 'degeneracy'. In his ponderous tome *Degeneration* (1892), Nordau assigns the

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<sup>628</sup> Seitler, p. 137.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid, p. 130.

<sup>633</sup> Hutchinson, p. 134.

<sup>634</sup> Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive*, p. 9.

negativity of the death drive to the 'atavistic' body of the degenerate individual. Nordau's diagnostic gaze seizes on individuals and populations considered anathema to narratives of social and biological viability. By pretending to decode the so-called 'stigmata' of the degenerate body, he interprets biological 'abnormality' as a sign of evolutionary regression and thus as a visible marker of 'anti-futurity'. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso devised the notorious principle of biological 'atavism' to explain the evolutionary backwardness of the degenerate individual.<sup>635</sup> And it is for this reason that Esposito refers to atavism as a 'biological anachronism': it snips the thread of evolutionary history, reverses its direction of travel, or ties it in recursive loops.<sup>636</sup> 'Biological anachronism' is also an apt description of Samuel Beckett's degenerating narrators. Devolving as they often do to 'lowly' or bestialised figures, Beckett's narrator-protagonists return, or appear as if they are returning, to pre-human forms of life. Given the polychronic time-scales of Beckett's post-war novels, it is possible to read the texts of the *Trilogy* as elaborations of the nonlinear temporality of atavistic decline. This reading would view his depictions of atavistic bodies as fleshing out the Seidler's intricate analyses of the polytemporal intersection of the animal past and the human present. However, I want to expand the idea of atavism to embrace its potential for a critique of affirmative posthumanisms of generative life.

This chapter examines Beckett's creative refashioning of some key aspects of Max Nordau's degeneration theory, focussing in particular on how Beckett's depictions of atavistic regression contest the redemptive temporality of affirmative posthumanisms and eugenics. For Nordau, degeneracy and atavism are mutually reinforcing conditions embedded in the pathological body of the 'abnormal' individual: 'Every one of [the degenerate's] qualities is atavistic, and we know, moreover, that atavism is one of the most constant marks of degeneracy'.<sup>637</sup> The circular logic elaborated here reveals the fundamental reciprocity of atavism and degeneration: 'The disease of degeneracy', Nordau claims, 'consists precisely in the fact that the degenerate organism has not the power to mount to the height of evolution already attained by the species, but stops on the way at an earlier point'.<sup>638</sup> Degeneration is a complex and ambiguous term, informed by a raft of cultural anxieties, discussed in various national and political contexts, accumulating new shades of meaning in different times and places. It is often associated with modernist 'revitalization movements', which elaborated apocalyptic forecasts of racial decline to bolster their utopian visions of regeneration, and promoted mythic ideas of 'palingenesis' or the renewal of national or racial communities. For Roger Griffin, 'palingenesis' connotes 'an organic process by which degeneration is the prelude

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<sup>635</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 119.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>637</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: W. Heinemann, 1913), p. 555.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.

to a regeneration in which the old is subsumed in a new form'.<sup>639</sup> Convinced that modernity had taken a decadent turn, *fin-de-siècle* eugenicists calling for palingenetic renewal anticipated the coming of a more vital future purged of decadence and degeneration: a time of blank slates, fresh hopes, and healthy bodies. This drive for a redemptive break with the dysgenic past suggests a progressivist view of history compatible with the linear temporality of modernity. As Seitler has put it: 'In its own attempts to establish the modern world as something modern, as something progressive and progressing, eugenics sought to manage human life at its reproductive core'.<sup>640</sup>

A number of critics have argued that Beckett's hostility to 'reproductive futurism' demonstrates his political resistance to the eugenicist discourse prevalent in the early twentieth century. For Seán Kennedy, Beckett's story 'First Love' 'stubbornly refus[es] the logic of any collective future that [the Child] may be held to signify'.<sup>641</sup> Contrasting Beckett's anti-natalism with the ban on contraception in the Irish Free State and eugenicist politics of W.B. Yeats, Kennedy claims that 'the Child in Beckett signifies Edelman's coercive future and is rejected accordingly'.<sup>642</sup> For Paul Stewart, Beckett's 'misopaedia' and 'horror of reproduction' convey an ethical commitment to the reduction of human suffering: beginning from Schopenhauer's conflation of suffering and life, Beckett reaches a counterintuitive ethical standpoint in which the horror of life and birth reinforces an all-embracing compassion towards living beings.<sup>643</sup> In lockstep with Edelman's queer opposition to 'reproductive futurism', this influential current in recent Beckett scholarship insists on 'the ethico-political value of resisting life'.<sup>644</sup> Conversely, Lloyd Houston finds evidence of Anglo-Irish prejudice and 'anti-democratic animus' in Beckett's fiercely anti-natalist stance.<sup>645</sup> 'Beckett's position does not reject but in fact reflects and participates in precisely the noxious logic and implicit and explicit prejudices of the European and Irish eugenicism against which his work has traditionally been aligned'.<sup>646</sup> Not only is this an incisive challenge to previous accounts of Beckett's resistance to pro-natalism, but Houston's revisionist account is the first to contest the received wisdom that Beckett's politics are beyond reproach. Addressing Beckett's anxiety about the 'hyper-fertile Catholic horde' — an anxiety indicated by his vision of Ireland overrun by 'decorticated multiparas' in his essay 'Censorship in the Saorstat' (written in 1934 and revised in 1936) — Houston takes

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<sup>639</sup> Roger Griffin, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism. A "mazeway resynthesis"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15.1 (January 2008), 9-24 (p. 21).

<sup>640</sup> Seitler, p. 137.

<sup>641</sup> Kennedy, 'First Love', p. 80.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>643</sup> Paul Stewart, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 97.

<sup>644</sup> Hunt and Youngblood, p. 20.

<sup>645</sup> Lloyd Houston, "'Sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter': Beckett, Censorship, and Fertility", *The Review of English Studies*, 69.290 (1 June 2018), 546-564 (p. 6).

<sup>646</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

issue with the scholarly consensus that Beckett's work is unswervingly critical of the eugenicist attitudes put in practice by European nation-states in the early twentieth century.<sup>647</sup>

These historically oriented accounts of Beckett's resistance to (and potential complicity with) eugenicism and biopower are persuasive. However, critics have not considered the possibility that the biopolitical contexts Beckett encountered were a defining influence on his reinvention of the novel form and his experiments with narrative time. Indeed, while Kennedy and Houston reach very different conclusions about Beckett's relation to eugenicism, they both limit the scope of their analyses to the following question: how did the context of post-Civil War Ireland shape Beckett's 'horror of reproduction'? To gauge the nonlinear temporalities elaborated in Beckett's engagement with ideas of degeneration I will expand the parameters of the debate by switching our focus from Beckett's anti-natalist stance to his creative refashioning of the concept of atavism. Atavistic regression is everywhere in his fiction. Belacqua is 'border-creature' who wants to 'troglodyse' himself.<sup>648</sup> Molloy winds up 'crawling on his belly, like a reptile'.<sup>649</sup> And the Unnamable assumes the identity of a vermiform creature known only as Worm. For Seitler, the atavistic plot 'regresses as it progresses; or, rather, it progresses by way of its regression'.<sup>650</sup> Similarly, Beckett's bestial transformations suggest that his treatment of time and narrative combines anti-futurity (bodily regression) with futurity (narrative progression). The recent focus on 'reproductive futurism' and anti-futurity in Beckett Studies doesn't do justice to Beckett's formal experiments with the polytemporal time of atavism.<sup>651</sup> To insist on this claim is in part to remind ourselves that futurity (not 'reproductive futurism') is never completely absent from the horizon in the Beckett Country. It is not that Beckett's 'creatures' occupy a temporal horizon in which any flicker of futurity is eclipsed, but rather that for them the time to come contracts to a futural minimum, whereby the chronological opening towards the not-yet ('I'll go on') is interwoven with its own radical impossibility ('I can't go on'). Beckettian anti-futurity thus contains paradoxical splinters of future time that both *work against* the refusal of the time to come and *confirm* the denial of historical and narrative temporalities founded on the redemptive time of 'reproductive futurism'. What emerges from this constitutive tension is a mundane time that presses onwards without the theological or secular trappings of a *redemptive* futurity converting the time to come into the site of hope and possibility, since this mundane version of future time ('I'll go on') reiterates its own failure and ending ('I can't go on'). As excluded figures barred from modernity's projects of temporalized redemption, Beckett's degenerate creatures embody the passing of a mundane time shot through with a sense of catastrophic loss and exposed to a future

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Dreams of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Calder, 1993), p. 123.

<sup>649</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 91.

<sup>650</sup> Seitler, p. 51.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid, p. 7.



of the '[m]ere-most minimum'.<sup>652</sup> This is a future which refuses to occupy the consummated time of Christian redemption or the secular palliative of a progressive history dictated by the linear time of 'reproductive futurism'. It may be a 'decadent futurity' fixated on a past of destitution and historical ruin that resists narrative articulation in the present. But it is still a future that goes on.

Modernity's progressive time rolls towards its perpetually deferred consummation. It keeps history on the right road and departs from the benighted past with ever-increasing velocity. Civilization surges ahead, leaving barbarism in the dust. It is this confidence in the forward propulsion of linear time that atavism puts so violently out of joint. But atavism is far from being a subversive panacea untainted by the toxic tendencies of political modernity. True, we can say that the nonprogressive time of atavism is an affront to what Beckett calls 'our pernicious and incurable optimism'.<sup>653</sup> At the same time, however, we find the anachronistic logic of atavistic regression at the heart of degeneration theory and modernist-era eugenicism, both of which condemn atavism to obsolescence and death in order to defend the linear temporality of progressive modernity. Just as 'atavism operated in part as a policing mechanism that fixed the human body within readable signs of aberrance', it also operated as a sign of the pathogenic elements in the body politic which eugenicists wanted to expel.<sup>654</sup> Indeed, it is crucial for our purposes here that late nineteenth-century degeneration theorists presented the 'abnormal' body as an obstacle to the unfolding of modernity's promise. Nordau's folly was to envision a future purged of bodily and mental 'defects', which meant that those 'outside' the norm, the so-called 'degenerates', were consigned to the past as figures of anti-life and anti-futurity. For Nordau, the tainted hereditary line 'does not continually subsist and propagate itself, but, fortunately, is soon rendered sterile, and after a few generations often dies out before it reaches the lowest grade of organic degradation'.<sup>655</sup> This grim prognosis pins down a connection between organic decomposition and the sterile exhaustion of the hereditary line. For Nordau, then, the 'degradation' of healthy organic form results in a self-annihilating drift towards death and the erasure of futurity. In this way degeneration theory brings the regression of the species and the termination of futurity into a fatal alignment sealed by a double logic of self-destruction. Atavism is the master trope of this deathly configuration: it is the misalliance that occurs when the deep past, the modern present, and the endangered future cleave together in the flesh of bodies which disturb the linear time of modernity. According to Gülru Çakmak, '[t]he unidirectional movement from a primitive, uncivilized state to an evolved one attained the status of the norm'.<sup>656</sup> Thus, although we usually think of norms in spatial terms (i.e.

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<sup>652</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 91.

<sup>653</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), p. 15.

<sup>654</sup> Seitler, p. 7.

<sup>655</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: W. Heinemann, 191), p. 16.

<sup>656</sup> Gülru Çakmak, "'For the Strong Minded Alone': Evolution, Female Atavism, and the Degeneration in Aubrey Beardsley's *Salomé*" in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: studies in*

whether we are toeing the line or deviating from it), conceptions of linear time and the progressive movement of evolution and history often intersect with notions of bodily normalcy. *Echo's Bones* is a phantasmagoric tale of sexual perversion and degeneracy set in the spectral realm of the dead. It recounts the curious afterlife of Belacqua Shuah (the main protagonist of *More Pricks than Kicks*), who finds himself reanimated in mysterious circumstances and compelled to atone for a life spent in narcissistic indolence. Thus at the outset our 'dead and buried' hero finds himself (unhappily) back among the quick: the unwelcome fact that he is 'restored for a time by a lousy fate [...] to the low stature of animation' belying the sense of an ending properly befitting his posthumous condition.<sup>657</sup> If anything, the insistent presence of the phrases 'back',<sup>658</sup> 'revisit',<sup>659</sup> 'return',<sup>660</sup> 'reversion',<sup>661</sup> and 'restored' suggest that his death is an echo or reiteration of his life.<sup>662</sup> A kind of peculiar anti-climax, then, Belacqua's death and posthumous survival are emblematic of the logic of anachronism and lateness which is the signature temporality of decadence. As if to underline this sense of lost time, Belacqua cries out that he is '[t]oo late!' because his 'life is over'.<sup>663</sup> Indeed, given that the story takes place *after* Belacqua's end, Beckett in a sense radicalises and the temporality of lateness infusing the art of decadence.

Echoes of Augustine and Dante provide the story's atmosphere of sin, guilt, and punishment (no redemption here!). But Beckett's engagement with the theme of the afterlife also resonates with a chorus of less distant literary voices. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* famously presents London as a city of the dead; Ezra Pound begins his *Cantos* with a Homeric journey to the underworld; Wyndham Lewis's *The Childermass* envisions an afterlife populated by men killed in World War I; and Joyce's debt to *The Divine Comedy* is a leitmotif running from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*. How does Beckett's story relate to the purgatorial visions of the so-called 'Men of 1914'? Given this fairly extensive archive of high modernist works concerned with the deadness of modernity and the 'afterlife' of the European tradition, we might ask ourselves if Beckett's story reflects on its own relative lateness within the micro-tradition of the modernist afterlife narrative. According to Claire Colebrook, the modernist impulse to visit the realm of the dead is in one sense a gesture of 'revitalization': 'modernism sought to inject life into a desiccated tradition by giving blood to the voices of the past. Descending into Hades where all the voices of history and becoming had been reduced to so much noise, the modernist artist would once again experience the opening or genesis of culture, retrieving life's original,

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*European fin de siècle*, ed. by Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 183-202 (p. 188).

<sup>657</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, 1933, ed. by Mark Nixon (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 6.

<sup>658</sup> Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, p. 3.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

animating and fertile voice'.<sup>664</sup> '[A]t the same time', she continues, 'modernism could only take hold *not* by producing more literary life but by deadening the textual corpus'.<sup>665</sup> Like this 'counter-vital modernism of the dead letter', Beckett treats the archive as a crypt of lifeless fragments shorn of any trace of an 'animating and fertile voice'.<sup>666</sup> Colebrook argues that this 'counter-vital modernism' opposes the arrogation of the feminine in 'anti-Cartesian' modernisms which assert a vitalist affirmation of fluidity against 'an affectless, lifeless, disembodied Cartesian prison'.<sup>667</sup> These anti-Cartesian modernisms would be the aesthetic forerunners of the contemporary posthumanist philosophies that valorise the productive futurity of material flows and decentralized agencies. It is safe to imagine that Beckett would have little to offer resurgent vitalisms of the contemporary scene. If anything, Beckett's extensive use of quotation suggests a 'devitalization' of the word reminiscent of an anti-vital decadent aesthetics. And if Beckett figures his relation to the canonical achievements of literary modernism as a kind of belatedness, the apotheosis of lateness in his work may suggest an extraordinary awareness on his part that to come *after* modernism is precisely to register the persistence of the backward-facing disposition of decadence. Sherry's version of 'temporal imaginary of decadence', which resists the mandatory optimism of progressive time and the promise of futurity, stubbornly refuses to participate in modernity's cult of newness. Similarly, the excess of allusion stitched into the warp and woof of Beckett's text suggests an antiquarian fascination with the archive as the repository of arcane learning and dead languages, thereby aligning the text with 'the decadent cult of the "rare word"'.<sup>668</sup>

Beckett knowingly embraces a raft of decadent tropes and themes: the last scion, infertility, prostitution, sadomasochism, narcissism, aristocratic decay, venereal disease, youthful death, the corrosion of sexual morality, and so on. In Beckett's story the theme of perversion is no simple echo of the Sadean literature of transgression, which gets its kicks by flouting social norms and moral proscriptions, and, through its depictions of sexual rebellion, seeks to scramble the prevailing codes of moral conduct. This form of transgression is invariably a prisoner of the norms it attempts to demolish: it converts the moral Law into the hypostasized origin of excessive pleasures. For Beckett, perversion is at once a 'decadent' trope and a site of political conflict; it has no political use-value in itself, but it is significant as a crossing-point between aesthetic decadence and the medical discourse of degeneration. Thus, one of the uses of perversion in *Echo's Bones* is to draw attention to the link between sexual conduct and projections of racial and national futurity. Indeed, we might think of degeneration theory and aesthetic decadence as distinct yet related 'hermeneutic regimes' (to use Hutchinson's phrase again). Both figure prominently in *Echo's Bones* and together hold the

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<sup>664</sup> Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman*, p. 211.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>668</sup> Nicholls, p. 58.

interpretive key to unlock many of the text's obscure allusions to sadomasochism, degeneracy, prostitution, and venereal disease. It is furthermore possible to relate these two 'hermeneutic regimes' to two texts that Beckett read and took notes from the early 1930s.<sup>669</sup> The first is Nordau's *Degeneration*, which, as we have seen, diagnosed aesthetic decadence and the entire *fin-de-siècle* sensibility as a symptom of degeneracy. The second text is Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1930) — a comprehensive analysis of the 'morbid' turn taken by the European sensibility in the nineteenth century.

The simultaneous conflict and consonance between the tropology of decadence and the medical discourse of degeneration finds expression in the first section of the narrative, where a syphilitic prostitute named Zaborovna Privet interrupts Belacqua's masturbatory self-absorption. There are numerous allusions to the literature of decadence during their conversation, including to Baudelaire's poem 'Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs'. When a ramshackle procession of figures pass before Belacqua and Zaborovna, among them are the two 'good sisters', 'Debauch and Death', from Baudelaire's poem.<sup>670</sup> There is an elective affinity between 'Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs' and *Echo's Bones*: both texts ironically praise the fertility of prostitutes; both associate prostitution with venereal disease and death; and both link sexual corruption to anti-futurity. Baudelaire's allegory of prostitution suggests not only that sexual perversity ('Debauchery') is the sibling of self-destruction ('Death'), but also that their incestuous union eclipses the accursed poet's access to futurity, as implied by the fusion of the 'gruesome rose' ('Debauchery') with funeral 'cypress' ('Death') in poem's closing lines. As Matthew Potolsky notes, 'the poem reads like a traditional paradoxical encomium [...] prais[ing] what is loathsome and fearful, addressing Debauchery and Death as "good sisters", and lauding their amiability, health, fertility, and charms'.<sup>671</sup> In the poem's final lines, however, 'Debauchery and Death' offer an ecstatic death to the poet as an 'alternative to productive life'.<sup>672</sup> Death and anti-futurity are likewise key to the figuration of the prostitute in the medico-psychiatric discourse of fin-de-siècle degeneration theory. Needless to say, in this pseudo-scientific context venereal disease and prostitution have none of the fatal glamour found in 'Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs'. While Baudelaire's poetic immoralist is more than half in love with disease and death, Lombroso and Nordau connect sexual debauchery to the danger of social anomie and the atavistic regression of the species. For proponents of eugenics around the turn of the twentieth century, sexual debauchery was a lethal threat to the health of populations and the future of the nation. As Michel Foucault explains, beginning in the late nineteenth-century doctors increasingly perceived that:

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<sup>669</sup> For Beckett's notes on Nordau, *Beckett's Dream Notebook*, ed. by John Pilling (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999).

<sup>670</sup> Beckett, *Echo's Bones*, p. 11.

<sup>671</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letter: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 104.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*

debauched, perverted sexuality has effects at the level of the population, as anyone who has been sexually debauched is assumed to have a heredity. Their descendent will also be affected for generations... This is the theory of degeneracy; given that sexuality is the source of individual diseases and that it is the nucleus of degeneracy.<sup>673</sup>

The degenerative threat of venereal disease is not disclosed when Beckett first introduces Zaborovna in the narrative. By contrast, the narrator offers ironic praise to her fertility: ‘There was nothing at all of the grave widow or anile virgin about her, nothing in the least barren in her appearance. She would be, if she were not already, the fruitful mother of children of joys’.<sup>674</sup> This ironic praise of female reproductivity suggests is perhaps a parody of the modernist misappropriation of the feminine among male writers who used the female body a vessel for fantasies of renewal and overcoming decadence. If this is the case, however, Beckett’s resistance to the anti-Cartesian, vitalist strain of modernism examined by Colebrook draws on a different misogynist tradition in modern letters: Baudelaire and the decadents. In a further echo of ‘Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs’, this paradoxical encomium to Zaborovna’s fertility and maternal qualities crystallizes the biological threat that her sexuality poses to familial values and reproductive health. In a reversal of tone reminiscent of Baudelaire’s final apostrophe, Beckett reprises the outworn decadent trope of ‘the enchantress turned hag’.<sup>675</sup> The delayed revelation of Zaborovna’s ‘wrinkled gums and [...] Hutchinson fangs’ implies that the procreative threat of her concealed venereal disease is intensified by the fatal attraction of her ‘feminine’ artifice.<sup>676</sup> This is a familiar misogynist paradox: Zaborovna is as at once too artificial and too natural, and she employs the ruse of beauty to lure Belacqua into sexual reproduction. Once we recognise that the phrase ‘Hutchinson fangs’ conflates syphilis with canine animality it becomes difficult to deny that Zaborovna’s Ovidian transformation is presented as an atavistic regression; so in this case — in contrast to Edelman’s account of ‘reproductive futurism’ — heterosexual reproduction does not represent ‘the Child’ and futurity but instead becomes a harbinger of atavistic heredity. This means that her atavistic transformation is both a regression to the bestial and a procreative threat to future generations. Kennedy and McNaughton have read the story’s preoccupation with the themes of childbirth and degeneration as representative of Beckett’s dismissal of the eugenicist discourse of heredity. Kennedy regards the story’s depiction of degeneracy as symptomatic of Beckett’s political hostility to the eugenicist politics that bolster W.B. Yeats’s nostalgia for Irish Big House tradition.<sup>677</sup> Similarly, McNaughton argues that ‘Belacqua’s atonement — reproductive

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<sup>673</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. by David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 252.

<sup>674</sup> Beckett, *Echo’s Bones*, p. 5.

<sup>675</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 160-168.

<sup>676</sup> Beckett, *Echo’s Bones*, p. 14.

<sup>677</sup> Sean Kennedy, “‘Echo’s Bones’: Samuel Beckett After Yeats” in *Yeats and Afterwords: Christ, Culture, and Crisis*, ed. by Marjorie Howes and Joseph Valente (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2014) 235-253 (p. 246).

sex that helps to maintain a patriarchal political order — cannot be separated from what apparently resists it: so-called deviant sexual impulses, masturbation homosexuality, oral sex, and so on'.<sup>678</sup> While McNaughton acknowledges the pervasive iconography of sexual deviance in *Echo's Bones*, he ignores Beckett's engagement with literary decadence, and his suggestion that the story resists patriarchy glosses over the misogynistic aspects of the text. As we have seen, Beckett's use of decadent tropes of voracious female sexuality parallels his fascination with infertility and non-productive sex. According to Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen, the misogyny that infuses *fin-de-siècle* decadence

has been interpreted as a consequence of the exaltation of the artificial on the part of some Decadents, as well as their hostility to nature; but it may also reveal their tendency toward a kind of hatred of life that regarded woman, the one who gives birth, as its central symbol.<sup>679</sup>

At first glance, the 'horror of life' that Beckett shares with this aspect of decadence seems to conform to Edelman's critique of the cultural narratives surrounding heterosexual reproduction. For Edelman, as we have seen, the culture of 'reproductive futurism' regards the Child as a figure securing futurity and the progress of linear time. Since Kennedy aligned Beckett with Edelman's queer anti-natalism, there has been considerable agreement that 'the Child in Beckett signifies Edelman's coercive future and is rejected accordingly'.<sup>680</sup> By contrast, I have argued that the text's treatment of female atavism and degenerate maternity recasts *heterosexual reproduction* as a deathly transmission of hereditary disease and evolutionary regression. As Penelope Deutscher has pointed out, Edelman's account of the tyranny of 'reproductive futurism' needs to be revised and expanded if we are to make sense of the biopolitical scenarios in which reproduction becomes 'a principle of death and its protagonists those of antilife'.<sup>681</sup> Contra Edelman, Beckett's story presents heterosexual reproduction as figuring the negativity of the death drive and the gestation of nonviable life.

### Atavistic Desires

The *Trilogy* is the culmination of Beckett's creative refashioning of degeneration theory. As Alysia E. Garrison has put it, 'Beckett [...] made something like the degenerate body the protagonist of his *Three Novels*'.<sup>682</sup> It is surely likewise uncontroversial to claim that *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* are 'degeneration narratives', which is to say texts that

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<sup>678</sup> James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 50.

<sup>679</sup> Christopher Nissen, 'Introduction' in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: studies in European fin de siècle* ed. by Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-14 (p. 10).

<sup>680</sup> Kennedy, 'First Love', p. 90.

<sup>681</sup> Deutscher, p. 101.

<sup>682</sup> Alysia Garrison, 'Faintly Struggling Things: Inscrutable Life in Beckett's *The Unnamable*' in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Sean Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 89-111 (p. 102).

‘dramatize the decline of an atavistic body’.<sup>683</sup> After all: each of the three novels depicts figures undergoing the atavistic process of shedding the skin of the rational, humanist subject, as if regaining proximity with the distant pre-history of the species. If these narratives of regression deny the futurist drive behind the progressivist time of modernity, the temporality of decline they articulate primarily takes shape through Beckett’s misshaping of bodily form. The various expressions of this negative morphology suggest that the breakdown of formal unity does not proceed in a linear progression from the past to the future. Instead, vestiges of time past survive as atavistic remainders, which, as we will see, deform the present through a process of evolutionary retrogression. Beckett’s elaboration of polychronic temporalities is central to his post-war aesthetic of decomposition. It is for instance the defining temporal disposition of Molloy’s progressive decline towards reptilian animality.

When Molloy tells us that he has ‘abandoned the erect motion, that of man’,<sup>684</sup> he acknowledges his departure from the normative image of the human. That Molloy nonetheless remains aware of this normative conception of the human body can be seen when he describes his abandonment of the vertical axis as a transgression: ‘flat on my face by way of rest, *in defiance of the rules*, I suddenly cried, striking my brow, Christ, there’s crawling, I never thought of that’ (my italics).<sup>685</sup> Time and again, the creatures in the *Trilogy* fail to conform to the rules and regulations that are imposed on them. Not only do Beckett’s creatures abandon uprightness, and decline the virtues of rectitude and righteousness, but they are themselves beings in terminal and interminable decline. To track the various ways that Beckett undermines rules and regularity in *Molloy* it is instructive to consider the bent, slantwise geometry that characterises Molloy’s singular way of inhabiting the world. Take the example of his ‘hypotenusal posture’<sup>686</sup> when leaning precariously against a wall, or his description of being ‘bent double over a heap of muck’.<sup>687</sup> Or take his ability to adopt a posture that conforms to neither the vertical nor the horizontal axis, as when he describes himself ‘half-standing half-lying’.<sup>688</sup> Beckett also draws various parallels between deviations from verticality and deviant behaviour. Thus, it is Molloy’s inability to conform to the erect posture that instigates his altercation with a policeman and ultimately leads to his arrest. As Molloy explains: ‘my way of resting, my attitude when at rest, astride my bicycle, my arms on the handlebars, my head on my arms, was a violation of I don’t know what, public order, public decency’.<sup>689</sup> Following his arrest, Molloy acknowledges his fault and delivers an ironic disquisition on the virtues of uprightness: ‘It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil,

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<sup>683</sup> Seitler, p. 27.

<sup>684</sup> Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 90

<sup>685</sup> Ibid.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>687</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and of joy, without which they might collapse and roll on the ground'.<sup>690</sup>

In Beckett's writing, the animal past that civilization insists it has forgotten re-emerges from behind the tattered veil of humanity's hubristic self-conceptions. In *Molloy*, for example, Beckett establishes a chiastic relationship between the origins and the telos of the species body. If Molloy's return to the animal prehistory of the human enacts something like a return to the phylogenetic origins of the species, his search for the abject 'matter' of his mother signifies a return to ontogenetic origins of the individual organism. The dual logic of recapitulation and reversal at work here brings animality and the maternal body into alignment. But although Molloy's despeciation involves an uncanny reunion with his mother's flesh, this does not take the form an actual meeting between them. Rather, this (non)encounter is enacted in Molloy's excessive bodily decomposition, in the extravagant ruination of the proper, enclosed body. In both cases there is an emphasis on the biological beginnings of human life, and the narrative itself seems propelled towards a renewed contact with these 'lowly' origins. Accordingly, Molloy suggests that the best way of discovering the meaning of his life narrative would be to plunge his nose inside his mother's flesh: 'And if I'm ever reduced to looking for a meaning to my life, you never can tell, it's in that old mess I'll stick my nose to begin with, the mess of that poor old uniparous whore and myself the last of my foul brook, neither man nor beast'.<sup>691</sup> It is significant that Molloy's failed attempt to find his mother raises questions about the status of knowledge in the novel, and that he cannot remember her name or how to navigate his way towards her. Crucially, his memories of his mother are suggestive of the return to animality that Beckett explores throughout the *Trilogy*. For example, it is telling that Molloy's (blind) mother recognises her son by smell rather than sight, since in Beckett's work smell frequently signals a closing of the gap between humans and other animals: 'She knew it was me', says Molloy, 'by my smell'.<sup>692</sup> In this parody of the archetypal recognition scene, Beckett reverses the traditional hierarchy separating the 'higher' senses (seeing, hearing) from the 'lower' senses (smell, taste, touch); and by privileging smell over sight he challenges the pre-eminence of vision as a means of knowing the world. Noting the importance of smell in the Beckettian sensorium, Ulrika Maude argues that 'it is doubtful whether vision is the primary sense in Beckett's writing'.<sup>693</sup> When Molloy tells us that his mother was 'happy to smell [him]', for instance, the punning substitution of sight for smell indicates a displacement of vision by olfaction. It may be that Molloy accords primacy to smell because of its association with humanity's animal prehistory, holding out the possibility of closing the circle of self-knowledge by returning to these origins.

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>691</sup> Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 15.

<sup>692</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>693</sup> Ulrike Maude, 'Pavlov's Dogs and Other Animals in Samuel Beckett' in *Beckett and Animals*, ed. by Mary Bryden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82-93 (p. 90).



There are various potential sources for Beckett's tendency to connect the primacy of olfaction with the evolutionary descent of the human species. Esposito explains that

To say that the degenerate is abnormal means pushing him towards a zone of indistinction that it's completely included in the category of the human. Or perhaps better, it means enlarging the latter category so as to include its own negation: the non-man in man and therefore the man-animal [*uomo-bestia*]. It is the Lombrosian category of "atavism" [...] that performs the function of the excluding inclusion'.<sup>694</sup>

In certain respects, the pseudo-medical understanding of degeneration that informs Nordau's infamous account of fin-de-siècle culture resembles Beckett's notion of 'loss of species'. We should not be surprised, then, that Beckett's creatures display a variety of the symptoms that Nordau attributes to degeneracy, including a heightened sensitivity to olfactory stimulation. In Nordau's view, privileging the 'primitive' sense of smell above the 'rational' sense of vision is evidence of degeneration, and thus signifies a regression to an earlier stage of evolution: 'Smellers among degenerates represent an atavism going back, not only to the primeval period of man, but infinitely more remote still, to an epoch anterior to man'.<sup>695</sup> The olfactory sense, Nordau claims, 'has scarcely any share in man's knowledge. He obtains his impression of the external world no longer by the nose, but principally by the eye and ear'.<sup>696</sup> Accordingly, Nordau speculates that degenerate 'smellers' have regressed to the status of 'animals amongst whom sexual activity was directly excited by odiferous substances'.<sup>697</sup> He goes on to suggest that 'smellers' are 'like dogs' because they acquire 'their knowledge of the world by the action of their noses'.<sup>698</sup> If Nordau argues that dogs occupy a lowly position on the evolutionary continuum because they privilege olfactory knowledge, Beckett's creatures often have recourse to this canine epistemology. By excavating the pre-rational, sensory substrate of knowledge, Beckett explores ways of knowing that exceed the rationalist epistemology which distinguishes the sovereign, upright human subject. And just as Nordau's degenerates relinquish the noble deportment of civilized humanity and derive sexual gratification in the same fashion as dogs, so Beckett's creatures relinquish the erect posture and imitate the attitudes of canine sexuality. Noting that 'no animal's presence is more pervasive [in *Molloy*] than that of the dog',<sup>699</sup> Philip Solomon argues that Moran's interest in the genitals of his neighbour's dog Zulu may imply 'an association between human sexuality and the indiscriminate sexuality of the dog'.<sup>700</sup> When Molloy describes his intercourse with Ruth/Edith, for instance, he relates how his lover 'bent over the couch, because of her rheumatism, and I went in behind'.<sup>701</sup> 'It seemed alright to me',

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<sup>694</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 119.

<sup>695</sup> Nordau, p. 503.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid, p. 504.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid.

<sup>699</sup> Philip Howard Solomon, 'Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*: A Dog's Life', *The French Review*, 41.1 (October 1967), 84-91 (p. 84).

<sup>700</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

<sup>701</sup> Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 56.

Molloy continues, ‘for I had seen dogs, and I was astonished when she confided that you could go about it differently’.<sup>702</sup> Molloy’s dog-inspired sexual habits encapsulates the idea that being behind the human involves a refusal of sexual reproductivity. In the next section, I want to suggest that the call of the anti-vital and degeneracy are central to Beckett’s engagement with Nazi biopolitics and artistic censorship.

### **‘no human shape’: Beckett, Degeneration, Nazism**

What, then, is the value of ‘life’ in Beckett’s fiction? As we have seen, the anti-vital — and its ironic offspring: the anti-natal — is an especially fecund theme in Beckett’s work, endlessly reiterated in paradoxes and oxymora. The final section of this chapter enquires into the ways in which Beckett’s encounters with the Nazi politics of life informed his presentation of the ‘misshapen’ body. While Hitler wanted to impose classical form on the German people by surgically removing degenerate flesh from the ‘Aryan’ body, Beckett distorts aesthetic form by incorporating disfigured flesh into his late modernist writing.

Beckett was arguably literary modernism’s consummate maestro in the art of degeneration. The reasons why degeneration is a pervasive feature of his work are multiple and complex, yet it is possible to trace his fascination with the subject back to his close scrutiny of a single text. As John Pilling’s edition of the ‘Dream Notebook’ shows, Beckett studied Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) in the early 1930s. In this diatribe against symbolism and aesthetic decadence, Nordau claimed that the cultural forms of *fin-de-siècle* Europe were symptomatic of an epidemic of physical and mental disorder which had its source in the biological decline of the species. Siobhan Purcell has explored the formative influence of Nordau’s ideas on Beckett’s representation of disability in his early fiction. According to Purcell, while ‘Nordau lamented the perceived decline of physical and aesthetic form, Beckett privileges [...] impaired states, even manifesting them at the level of form’.<sup>703</sup> Further, she argues that Beckett’s ‘concern with the conflated representation of aesthetic and physical form’ testifies to his ‘fascination with the nature of corporeal difference and a concomitant mission to deform his own work’.<sup>704</sup> While I agree with Purcell’s fruitful claim that Beckett’s aesthetic investment in notions of bodily deformity is key to his remaking of the novel form, her essay does not take into account the ways in which the presence of disability and deformity in Beckett’s work involves a negotiation with the biopolitical imperatives of early twentieth-century Europe. According to Joseph Valente, ‘[t]he image of disability in modernist literature is a highly mediated effect of the development of the regime of biopower over the course of the nineteenth century’.<sup>705</sup> My reading of *The Unnamable* suggests that Beckett’s experiments with

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<sup>702</sup> Ibid.

<sup>703</sup> Siobhán Purcell, “‘Buckled Discourses’: Disability and Degeneration in Beckett’s “More Pricks Than Kicks””, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 27.1 (2015), 29-41 (p. 31).

<sup>704</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>705</sup> Valente, p. 380.

ideas of bodily and aesthetic deformity constitute a significant chapter in the history of the antagonism between modernism and biopolitics.

It is no coincidence that Nazism enlisted ‘the aesthetics of human disqualification’ in its drive to craft the eugenic ‘Aryan’ body of the German people. ‘Eugenics has been of signal importance to oppression’, Siebers writes, ‘because eugenics weds medical science to a disgust with mental and physical variation’.<sup>706</sup> The expression of disgust towards nonstandard bodies in Nazi propaganda discloses the way in which the ‘aesthetics of human disqualification’ — combined with the biopolitical paradigm of the Third Reich — worked to exclude ‘degeneracy’ from the collective body of the German nation. As Siebers has put it, Hitler ‘embraced health and racial homogeneity as the measures of quality human beings. Disease and disability were his principle disqualifiers’.<sup>707</sup> The Nazi regime’s commitment to bodily perfection consisted in a lethal programme of racial regeneration which combined aesthetic censorship with eugenicist policies in a dual assault on ‘dysgenic’ form. Nazism thus extended the reach of aesthetic judgement beyond its traditional sphere of authority and used it as the basis for excluding bodies encoded as ‘defective’.<sup>708</sup> Crucially, the interweaving of ‘degeneracy’ and aesthetics that began with Nordau reached its conclusion in the Third Reich:

*Degeneration* was principally a medical term before Max Nordau applied it to art. It referred throughout the last half of the nineteenth century to individuals who departed from norms of human health because of genetic difference, sexual habits deemed excessive, or shattered nerves. The Nazis applied these distinctions as standards of aesthetic beauty. Degenerate art deserved its name in their view because it included bodily deformities, bloodshot eyes, feebleness, and signs of nervous exhaustion—all disabling conditions supposedly brought about by racial impurity or the stress of modern life. Jews, homosexuals, and criminals were automatically assumed to be biologically inferior, and the Nazis found evidence of their assumptions in the physical traits given to people in works of modern art.<sup>709</sup>

Just as Nordau locates the visible signs of degeneracy in ‘deformities’, ‘stunted growths’, and physical ‘asymmetry’, so the National Socialists represented the ‘abnormal’ type as a body without ‘proper’ form.<sup>710</sup> In his *Third Person* (2012), Roberto Esposito argues that Nazi biopolitics conceived of degenerate life as ‘a counter type, defined by its original deformation or by the absence of form, which reduced it to simple living material’.<sup>711</sup> Like Giorgio Agamben in his influential *Homo Sacer* series, Esposito locates the ‘thanatopolitical’ core of Nazism in the extermination of ‘bare life’. What distinguishes Esposito’s account of Nazi biopolitics is his claim that the regime substantiated its acts of genocide by reducing the ‘degenerate’, ‘non-Aryan’ body to ‘dead life or death that lives, a flesh without a body’.<sup>712</sup> Here Esposito’s crucial

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<sup>706</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetic*, p. 27

<sup>707</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid, pp. 28-39.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>710</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>711</sup> Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 57.

<sup>712</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 134.

distinction between the body and the flesh comes into view. If Nazism conceived of the racial body as a self-enclosed and purified form, it imagined that degenerate ‘life inhabited by death is simply flesh, an existence without life’.<sup>713</sup> It was National Socialism’s fanatical attachment to the organicist idea of the body, along with its quest to translate ‘Jew’ and ‘abnormal’ into synonyms for ‘life unworthy of life’, which resulted in the genocidal violence of the camps and, ultimately, the self-destruction of the Third Reich: ‘the life unworthy of life is existence deprived of life — a life reduced to bare [*nuda*] existence’.<sup>714</sup> As Esposito puts it, ‘Nazism treated the German people as an organic body that needed a radical cure, which consisted in the violent removal of a part that was already considered spiritually dead’.<sup>715</sup> Deformation was thus the danger from which the ‘Aryan’ body had to free itself in order to attain spiritual perfection:

The supreme spiritual value for a race is to achieve the perfect form of its somatic features, because this shape is nothing other than the expression of the realization of the truth of the idea, of the type, of the soul of the people.<sup>716</sup>

As a result, the spiritualization of Germany’s formed body contrasted absolutely with the de-spiritualization of ‘non-Aryan’ flesh.

What is crucial for our purposes here is that the obsession with the spiritualization of bodily shape or form that defines the Nazi politics of life directly correlates with their notorious campaign against ‘degenerate art’.<sup>717</sup> The Nazi preference for classical aesthetic form mirrored a revulsion with the fractured surfaces of avant-garde painting and sculpture. Many Nazi ideologues expressed hostility towards modernist form, because they viewed it ‘as the wrong kind of representation of the wrong kind of bodies; a racial, eugenic, and biopolitical notion that takes us directly from the expropriation and destruction of paintings and sculptures deemed degenerate to the elimination of life deemed unfit to live’.<sup>718</sup> In a declaration on the future of German *Kultur*, Hitler insisted that ‘[w]e want only the celebration of the healthy body in art’.<sup>719</sup> Within this racialized vision of *Kultur*, Jewish or ‘Non-Aryan’ art is in essence defined as a celebration of crime, weakness, and pathology: ‘It practices the glorification of all vices and monstrosities’, Joseph Goebbels argued, ‘rais[ing] to the level of an artistic ideal whatever is nonheroic, ugly, sick, and decomposed’.<sup>720</sup> Eric Michaud claims that the notion of life imitating art underwrites the Nazis’ approval of classical aesthetics and their campaign against ‘degenerate art’: ‘just as the ideal of Greek art ought to necessarily be embodied in [Hitler’s]

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<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>716</sup> Simona Forti, ‘The Biopolitics of Souls: Racism, Nazism, and Plato’, *Political Theory*, 34.1 (February 2006), 9-32 (p. 15).

<sup>717</sup> The most comprehensive discussion of the formative role of art in the racial politics of Nazism is in Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. by Janet Lloyd, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>718</sup> Neil Levi, *Modernist Form and the Myth of Jewification* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 50.

<sup>719</sup> Quoted in Tobin Siebers, ‘Hitler and the Tyranny of the Aesthetic’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 24.1 (April 2000), 96-110 (p. 100).

<sup>720</sup> Joseph Goebbels qtd. in Michaud, p. 152.

people, so too it was at all costs necessary to prevent degenerate art from engendering monsters'.<sup>721</sup> As such, Nazi ideologues established a mimetic relation between art and the body politic of the Third Reich, whereby artistic form actively *produces* rather than merely represents the ideal form of the healthy 'Aryan' body.

When Beckett visited Germany in 1936-7, he wrote in his diaries about the restrictions which the Nazi regime imposed on the public exhibition of modernist art. Although the censorship of 'non-Aryan' painting and sculpture limited his access to particular works, he was nevertheless able to view a number of modernist paintings in galleries which did not comply with the official policy.<sup>722</sup> More importantly, Beckett directly encountered the Nazis' attempts to strip modernist art of its cultural value during his trip, for, while he left Germany several months before the notorious 'Degenerate Art' exhibition in Munich, he visited the "Schreckenskammer des Entarten" (Chamber of Horrors of Degenerate Art) in the Moritzburg in Halle in January 1937.<sup>723</sup> 'Chambers of Horrors of Art' 'were special shows where the respective inventory of modern art, regardless of its style, was presented in order to defame it'.<sup>724</sup> With this demotion of modernism to the non-status of abjection, the Nazis placed non-mimetic art beyond the bounds of cultural decency. Those who promoted the rejection of modernism presented the censorship of 'degenerate art' as a reassertion of traditional norms of respectability and decorum after the cultural and social decadence of the Weimer Republic. As the name 'Chamber of Horrors' signifies, the propaganda against modernist art worked by arousing negative emotional responses among the German public: 'The most significant aspects of 'Entartete Kunst', if we listen the Nazis who toured it, were the feelings of revulsion that the artworks were supposed to excite in beholders. These works were revolting, of course, because they used disability to prove the degeneracy of modern existence'.<sup>725</sup> Because 'Dada and Expressionism deform the bodies rendered by them, seeming to portray disabled people', the Nazis presented these avant-garde movements as monstrous aberrations intent on overthrowing the norms of the purified Reich.<sup>726</sup>

Mark Nixon's research on the 'German Diaries' has revealed that Beckett was impressed with the Expressionist works he viewed during his melancholy artistic pilgrimage in Nazi Germany.<sup>727</sup> According to Nixon, 'Beckett's interest in German Expressionism was not limited to paintings, but extended to the plastic work of Ernst Barlach, whom he appears to have particularly admired'.<sup>728</sup> By the mid-1930s, when Beckett was searching for modernist

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<sup>721</sup> Michaud, p. 152.

<sup>722</sup> Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-37* (London; Continuum, 2011), p. 137.

<sup>723</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>724</sup> Christoph Zuschlag, 'Censorship in the Visual Arts in Nazi Germany' in *Suspended Licence: Censorship and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Elizabeth C. Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 210-234 (p. 212).

<sup>725</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, p. 39.

<sup>726</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>727</sup> Nixon, p. 140.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

artworks in defiance of the censors, Barlach was one of the many artists under attack from the National Socialists. In the words of the Nazi scholar Alfred Rosenberg, ‘Barlach [...] masters his material like a virtuoso, and no one will deny the monumentality of his carving. But what he designs in the way of human beings, that is alien, entirely alien: [...] small, half-idiotically gazing mixed variations of indefinable human types’.<sup>729</sup> This reading encodes Barlach’s figures as subhuman degenerates, since they violate the Nazi imperative to give a conclusive (i.e. ‘Aryan’) shape to the human species, while their lack of resemblance to the Nazi-approved type gives rise to anxieties about the dysgenic effects of racial mixing. What is most striking about Rosenberg’s negative appraisal of Barlach’s sculpture is his palpable sense of disgust in the face of the artist’s human figures. Unlike many of the Expressionist artworks which repelled Nazi ideologues, Barlach’s figures are not explicitly grotesque or obscene. As Andrew Mitchell explains, ‘[t]he degeneracy of Barlach’s sculpture lies in the formlessness that literally informs his work. The well-defined faces and hands of these sculptures emerge from the incomprehensible and unexplored masses at their heart’.<sup>730</sup> As the Nazis strived to genetically sculpt ‘Aryan’ bodies with chiselled outlines, so they rejected sculptures which expose the unshaped materiality of embodied life:

The National Socialist objection to the earthen nature of Barlach’s work is an objection to its unformed massiveness. The earth stands for material that has yet to be taken up and spiritualized. This spiritualization is an assumption of meaning on the unformed and the meaningless. Making is marking, forming, and the bestowal of meaning is life itself. The healthy life is one that grows ever more definite and meaningful in a meaningful world, growing into the full realization of its purpose.<sup>731</sup>

For Mitchell, Barlach’s ‘work is an act of resistance against the National Socialist drive to form — not, however, by simply asserting the opposite and championing a vague formlessness, but by revealing the limits of form as a contour of reciprocity with the raw matter that lies beyond it’.<sup>732</sup> In this way, Barlach’s artistic ‘negotiation between the formed and the unformed’ defies the fear of shapelessness which underpins Nazi biopolitics.<sup>733</sup>

Like Barlach’s plastic art, Beckett’s fiction exposes the human form to the ‘raw matter’ that exists both within and beyond the limits of the body. But what distinguishes Beckett’s negotiation between form and formlessness is his inclusion of the abject materiality of corporeal existence in his fiction. The presence of decomposing flesh and bodily effluvia in his work resists the Nazi imperative to exclude disgust-inducing matter from the sphere of cultural production. The ‘unformed’ — matter without an assigned meaning or purpose, in Mitchell’s

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<sup>729</sup> Quoted in Karsten Müller, “‘Violent Vomiting Over Me’: Ernst Barlach and National Socialist Cultural Policy” in *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany*, ed. by Olaf Peters, (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 176-185 (p. 181).

<sup>730</sup> Andrew Mitchell, *Heidegger Among the Sculptors: Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 92.

<sup>731</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>732</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

terms — resists the Nazis’ homicidal will-to-form by refusing the answer their call to spiritualize and fix the body. As Purcell suggests, it is also possible to read Beckett’s post-war work as ‘degenerate art’ because he creates literary form by including misshaping and distorting it.<sup>734</sup> To reiterate, degenerate form is always an undoing of form. It thus represents a kind of negative morphology, whereby formation and deformation are not so much two distinct processes as they are a singular activity of aesthetic de-composition. This aspect of Beckett’s aesthetic practice aligns his work with one of the prevailing tendencies of European modernism. As Maren Linett puts it, ‘[t]he notion of deforming the contours of what has come before serves as another way to express modernist efforts to “make it new”’.<sup>735</sup> Yet if the paradox of literary texts which generate form through its degeneration is that the new emerges amidst the breakdown and decay of the old, the modernist affirmation of aesthetic deformity also encodes paradoxical attitudes towards the disabled body. ‘Casting nonnormative embodiment as a degraded state’, Linett writes, ‘many twentieth century artworks nevertheless suggest that this degradation can be transcended through the superiority of modernist art’.<sup>736</sup> By contrast, Beckett strives to overturn the idea of art’s transcendence of the physical body by making ‘degraded’ and unformed materiality the primary substance of his post-war fiction. It is this insistence on the base matter of the body which separates Beckett from those modernist artists whose work implies that ‘representations of deformity and disability [...] are only acceptable to the degree that they have been transformed into and transcended by art’.<sup>737</sup> Contrariwise, bodily deformity in Beckett’s fiction reminds us of matter’s resistance to transcendent ideas of form, shattering the modernist ambition to transmute disability into the ‘superior’ realm of the aesthetic.

Beckett’s refusal of aesthetic sublimation exposes the unadorned materiality of the body. In his 1984 lectures *The Courage of Truth*, Michel Foucault includes Beckett in a tradition of modern painters and writers whose work ‘establish[ed] a relation to reality which is no longer one of ornamentation, or imitation, but one of laying bare, exposure, stripping, excavation, and violent reduction of existence to its basics’.<sup>738</sup> According to Foucault,

there is an anti-Platonism of modern art which was the great scandal of Manet and which, I think, without characterizing all art possible today, has been the profound tendency which is found from Manet to Francis Bacon, from Baudelaire to Samuel Beckett or Burroughs. Anti-Platonism: art as the site of the irruption of the basic, stripping existence bare.<sup>739</sup>

Foucault’s description of anti-Platonic modern art, I want to suggest, sheds light on Beckett’s aesthetic of deformity in his post-war trilogy of novels. For Benjamin Noys, Foucault’s account

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<sup>734</sup> Purcell, p. 39.

<sup>735</sup> Linett, p. 146.

<sup>736</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid.

<sup>738</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, trans. by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 188.

<sup>739</sup> Ibid.

of modern art provides a more compelling model for art's resistance to biopower than the vitalist affirmations of life's radical excess that characterise much of contemporary theory.<sup>740</sup> Noys argues that Foucault's remarks gesture towards 'a counter-form of art developed around the exposure of life', which would involve not only 'a stripping bare of existence, but also a stripping bare of language or visual expression. What Barthes called a 'writing degree zero' [...] converges with life degree zero, or 'bare life', to use Agamben's formulation'.<sup>741</sup> This conflation of 'bare life' with stripped-down literary form opens up a number of questions. What would an aesthetics of bare life look like? How might we begin to work through the paradox of a masterful aesthetic form that is capable of expressing formless life?

Before answering these questions it is worth noting that the modernist artists and writers who Foucault refers to — Manet, Bacon, Baudelaire, Burroughs, and, of course, Beckett himself — all made the flesh a central concern of their work. These modernist pioneers who helped dismantle 'social norms, values, and aesthetics canons' were also engaged in deforming the normative image of the human body, which aligns Foucault's 'counter-tradition' of art with the modernist aesthetics of disability.<sup>742</sup> So before Agamben developed his philosophy of 'bare life' and his magisterial account of modern biopolitics, Foucault had already adumbrated an aesthetics of bare flesh — electing Beckett as one of its patron saints. The acts of stripping away and laying bare are crucial to Beckett's portrayals of counter-normative embodiment. Beckett's bodies lose their functionality, lose their form, and thereby lose their taxonomic classifications. Nevertheless, the various acts of subtraction that Beckett performs on his fictional creatures leave a surplus of unclassifiable life: a formless remainder which is, so to speak, unnameable. Over the years critics have given different labels to the carnal remainder which is the Beckettian body — the monstrous, the posthuman, the creature<sup>743</sup> My contention is that the reduction of bodies to the 'formlessness' of 'bare life' in Beckett's writing requires us to rethink the idea of form in the *The Unnamable* in terms of an aesthetic practice of decomposition, an ongoing effort to 'lay bare' excluded life through an art of misshaping. If, as Noys has put it, Foucault's 'counter-art' of exposed life 'does not so much rest on the supposed plenitude of life overflowing the text, but a baring or voiding of life as value', then Beckett's stripping away of bodily form can be seen as an accommodation of denuded life in the wake of World War II.<sup>744</sup> In light of these remarks I want to suggest that articulating a Beckettian

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<sup>740</sup> Benjamin Noys, 'Vital Texts and Bare Life: The Uses and Abuses of Life in Contemporary Fiction', *CounterText*, 1.2 (September 2015), 169-185 (p. 170).

<sup>741</sup> Ibid.

<sup>742</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 88.

<sup>743</sup> For a discussion of the monstrous body in Beckett's *Trilogy* see Andrew Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). For a recent discussion of the posthuman in *The Unnamable* see Elizabeth Effinger, 'Beckett's Posthuman: The Ontology of *The Unnamable*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 23 (January 2011), 369-381. For an account of 'creaturely life' in Beckett's work which is relevant to the present discussion see Joseph Anderton, *Beckett's Creatures: Art of Failure After the Holocaust* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>744</sup> Noys, 'Vital Texts', p. 170.



resistance to biopolitics would not consist in an affirmation of life liberated from the norm; on the contrary, it would involve tracing how his aesthetic of deformity exposes readers to life stripped of value.

No aspect of the *The Unnamable* signifies the stripping away of art's transcendent aspirations more than the anarchic, uncontainable flesh of Beckett's creatures. Just as these distorted beings do not fit the mould of the 'human type', so their unruly flesh continually exceeds the perimeters of the sealed-off body. *The Unnamable* draws our terrified attention the malleability of the flesh, rearranging body parts in ways which diverge extravagantly from the image of the human as an enclosed, unified being. Beckett's stripping apart of the 'carnal envelope' explodes the anthropomorphic image of the completed human form, as does the severing of the Unnamable's nose, eyes, mouth, genitals, arms, hair, and legs from the trunk of its body.<sup>745</sup> We thus encounter flesh beyond the boundaries of the skin, and a series of body parts that do not on any occasion add up to an organic body. Rotting flesh and other putrescent substances offer a further source of unshaped matter, which infuses the text with 'the stench of decomposition'.<sup>746</sup> And if the Unnamable's tormentors describe it as having 'no human shape', this is because they are surrogates for Beckett's own stripping away of fleshy material.<sup>747</sup> It has been argued that the Unnamable's loss of human identity and exposure to unthinkable acts of torture closely parallel Agamben's account of the 'bare life' of the 'Muselmann' in the Nazi concentration camps.<sup>748</sup> Thus, David Houston Jones claims that in *The Unnamable* 'humanity is no longer distinct from animal life (or "bare life", in Agamben's terms)'.<sup>749</sup> While this reading takes account of the stripping away of life's value in the context of post-Holocaust Europe, Beckett's reduction of the flesh to a stripped down condition of unformed matter in many ways exceeds the figure of animalisation— hence, for example, the description of Worm as 'being less than a beast'.<sup>750</sup>

Rather than approaching the subject of 'bare life' in terms of the human/animal distinction, I argue that Esposito's configuration of 'bare life' as 'flesh without a body' illuminates Beckett's assault on human form. *The Unnamable* presents the monstrous body as both a scandalous distortion of the human and an unformed mass of matter. Beckett thus conceives of 'bare life' as stripped-raw lumps of flesh without a conclusive bodily form. While I agree with Alysia Garrison's observation that '[l]ife throughout the *Three Novels* gets

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<sup>745</sup> Beckett, *Unnameable*, p. 43.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>748</sup> Consider, for example, Alysia Garrison's claim that 'the *Unnamable* stages an ensemble of radically disempowered beings that resemble the radically deracinated figure, the *Muselmann*', see 'Faintly Struggling Things: Inscrutable Life in Beckett's *The Unnamable*' in *Samuel Beckett: History, Memory, Archive*, ed. by Sean Kennedy and Katherine Weiss (New York: Palgrave, 2009) 89-111 (p. 104).

<sup>749</sup> David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 61.

<sup>750</sup> Beckett, *Unnameable*, p. 72.

successively more bare', I find the claim that *The Unnamable* puts forward 'an ethical critique of the conditions that gave rise to the Holocaust' to some extent less persuasive.<sup>751</sup> Indeed, I would argue that Beckett's stripping away of the flesh implicates his art in violence rather than removing it to a transcendent standpoint of ethical purity. In many ways, National Socialism's broadsides against degenerate art prefigure Beckett's post-war vision of misshapen flesh. Consider, for example, Adolf Hitler's statement that it 'is not the mission of art...to wallow in filth for filth's sake, to paint the human being only in a state of putrefaction, [...] or to present deformed idiots as representatives of manly strength'.<sup>752</sup> There is a teeming mass of liquefied flesh, putrefaction, and monstrous embodiment running throughout Beckett's novel. He thus aggressively defies the Nazi conception that aesthetic form is what gives value to life. Instead, he implicates the process of aesthetic formation in the stripping away of life's value. Beckett seeks to fashion a text in which form emerges from deformity, where the narrator is a misshapen 'artist' who in turn misshapes other creatures. It is therefore possible to view *The Unnamable* not just as a degenerate body but also as a degenerate *artist*.<sup>753</sup> As the *Unnamable* is a deformed creature, so its 'artistic' creations cannot be assimilated within the contours of the 'normal' body: 'before executing [Mahood's] portrait, full length on his surviving leg, let me note that my next vice-exister will be a billy in the bowl, that's final, with his bowl on his head and his arse in the dust'.<sup>754</sup> This shift from a portrait of Mahood's one-legged body to an allusion to the legless Dublin beggar known as 'billy in the bowl' suggests a tendency towards an ever greater fragmentation of the flesh.<sup>755</sup> The process of de-creation continues with the appearance of Worm, who provides the novel's most radical example of a being defined by its lack of form, since this enigmatic being is described as 'shapeless heap, without a face',<sup>756</sup> and even as a 'tiny blur'.<sup>757</sup> Beckett's characters appear as monstrous beings, as figures of excess and deficiency, losing limbs or sprouting fleshy protuberances: 'A head has grown out of his ear, the better to enrage him, that must be it. The head is there, glued to the ear, and in it nothing but rage, that's all that matters, for the time being'.<sup>758</sup> The *Unnamable* has meanwhile 'lost all [it's] members'<sup>759</sup> and describes itself as 'human to be sure, but not exaggeratedly'.<sup>760</sup> Paradoxically, the ever-shifting flesh on display in the novel provides a sense of continuity and discontinuity:

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<sup>751</sup> Garrison, pp. 97-102.

<sup>752</sup> Quoted in Linett, p. 146.

<sup>753</sup> Garrison argues that 'Beckett may have made something like the degenerate body the protagonist of his *Three Novels*, but he performs an ethical reversal on Nordau's theory in *The Unnamable*', p. 102. By contrast, I argue that Beckett implicates his aesthetic practice in the devaluation of degenerate life.

<sup>754</sup> Beckett, *Unnameable*, p. 26.

<sup>755</sup> David Wheatley notes that 'Billy in the bowl' was 'a legless beggar [...] who would propel himself through the streets of Dublin in a wooden bowl'. See Wheatley, *Quite Exceptionally Anthropoid*, p. 66.

<sup>756</sup> Beckett, *Unnameable*, p. 71

<sup>757</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>758</sup> Ibid, pp. 70-71.

<sup>759</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

‘the one-armed one-legged wayfarer of a moment ago and the wedge-headed trunk in which I am now marooned are simply two phases of the same carnal envelope’.<sup>761</sup> Just as the misshapen narrator repeatedly changes form and yet remains the same, so the narrative shifts and digresses without losing its relentless momentum, which sets up the deformed body as an analogy for the consistent inconsistency of the narrative.

The more distorted and indistinct the flesh becomes, the more it resists conceptualisation and asserts its bare materiality. Even so, Beckett confounds this drive towards shapelessness by repeatedly invoking the notion of artistic formation. The tension between the formed and the formless expresses itself in the image of fashioning a human-shaped figure from base matter — ‘I’m like dust, they want to make a man from dust’ — which recalls the Jewish myth of the Golem, and, indeed, throughout the text the relation between material and textual deformity expresses itself as a degenerative process of, in Michaud’s terms, ‘engendering monsters’.<sup>762</sup> Throughout the novel these inconclusive lumps of flesh and matter never finally resolve themselves into living forms. Nor do they take shape according to the anthropomorphic blueprint of classical aesthetics. The Unnamable envisions the possibility that his tormentors will ‘leave [him] lying in a heap, in such a heap that none would ever be found again to try and fashion it’.<sup>763</sup> Here the Unnamable imagines that shapelessness may bring an end to the interminable refashioning of its material being. It is as if amorphous matter both invites and interrupts the will-to-form, thereby invoking the limits of the artist’s ability to integrate and contain materiality within a meaningful order. In this way artistic agency loses its connotations of mastery and appears instead in the guise of incapacity, impairment, or non-productivity, and the artist is thus recast in the role of, in Beckett’s words, ‘a non can-er’.<sup>764</sup> As Helen Deutsch points out, the second definition of ‘deformity’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is ‘misshapen’, which gestures towards the idea of ‘a negative agency, a body created and abandoned by its author’.<sup>765</sup> While Deutsch invokes the trope of *Deus absconditus* to parse the idea of misshaping, her description of a ‘negative agency’ which produces incomplete bodily forms also resonates with Nazi sermons against ‘degenerate’ artists. ‘Negative agency’ is precisely what is at stake in the Unnamable’s encounters with its ‘vice-existers’; as artists who produce failed and abandoned forms, they ‘don’t know what to do with’ this unshaped matter in order to animate it with life and meaning.<sup>766</sup> Moreover, the Unnamable’s admission that it ‘has no technique’ suggests artistic incompetence — like the incompetence which the Nazis

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<sup>761</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid.

<sup>764</sup> Quoted in Israel Shenker, ‘An Interview with Beckett’ in *Samuel Beckett; The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 146-149 (p. 148).

<sup>765</sup> Helen Deutsch, ‘Deformity’ in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. by Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 52-54 (pp. 52-3).

<sup>766</sup> Beckett, *Unnameable*, p. 62.

blamed for the presence of deformity in modernist art — though it in fact refers to the narrator's physical and mental impairments, including a complete privation of movement and understanding.<sup>767</sup> If this linkage of disability with a lack of artistic mastery recalls the propaganda against degenerate art, it is also in tune with Beckett's development of an art of failure and impotence after the Second World War.

As Nixon observes, Beckett's continued to associate aesthetic deformity with the Nazi campaign against degenerate art in the post-war period.<sup>768</sup> In his 1945 essay 'La peinture de van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon', Beckett gives an ironic assessment of abstract painting which echoes the National Socialist rhetoric of degeneracy: 'Ne vous approchez pas de l'art abstrait. C'est fabriqué pas une bande d'escrocs et d'incapables. Ils ne sauraient faire autre chose. Ils ne savent pas dessiner' [Do not approach abstract art. It is produced by a gang of criminals and incapable. They would not know how to do anything else. They do not know how to draw.].<sup>769</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that Beckett's championing of failure and impotence in his post-war work closely parallels these ventriloquized statements. As Purcell has intimated, it is possible to read his deformation of the novel form in his post-war fiction as, in part, a response to the attacks on degenerate art he witnessed in Germany in the mid-1930s.<sup>770</sup> It is certainly difficult not to hear a sardonic avowal of artistic intent in Beckett's statement that 'peinture à déformation est la refuge de tous les rates [painting which distorts is the refuge of all failures]'.<sup>771</sup> Deformation, for the Nazis, was a visible sign of aesthetic failure; for Beckett, in contrast, deformity and failure were essential components of an art that refused to find value in achievement and mastery. If the National Socialists conceived of aesthetic distortion as a symptom of artistic failure, Beckett embraced incapacity and 'failed form' as the defining mode of his art.<sup>772</sup> As he told Israel Shenker in 1956, 'I'm not the master of my material'.<sup>773</sup> Contrasting his own work with that of Franz Kafka, Beckett wrote: 'The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He's lost but he's not spiritually precarious, he's not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits'.<sup>774</sup> Bodily disintegration is, in Beckett's terms, an analogy for his art of non-achievement, an art which derives its form, or better, anti-form, from an 'exploit[ation]' of 'impotence' and 'ignorance'.<sup>775</sup> If Nazi violence constitutes one of the definitive contexts for Beckett's arrival at an aesthetic of deformity and stripped-bare flesh, his rejection of the 'aesthetic axiom that expression is achievement' may itself be an act of political

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>768</sup> Nixon, p. 136.

<sup>769</sup> Quoted in Nixon, p. 136.

<sup>770</sup> Purcell, p. 39

<sup>771</sup> Quoted in Nixon, p. 136.

<sup>772</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 2*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009-2016), p. 596.

<sup>773</sup> Quoted in Shenker, p. 148.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

resistance.<sup>776</sup> In *Mein Kampf* (1925), Hitler defines a vision of *Kultur* as ‘the realized form in which a race preserved itself’.<sup>777</sup> We know that in 1941 Beckett owned a ‘heavily underlined’ copy of *Mein Kampf*, which verifies his close scrutiny of Hitler’s propaganda.<sup>778</sup> It is thus conceivable that Beckett’s insistence on lowness, debasement, deformity, and unachieved form emerged as an assault on the Nazi politics of art.

Let us return to Foucault’s remarks about the anti-Platonism of modern art, from Manet and Baudelaire to Beckett, Bacon, and Burroughs. For Foucault, this lineage of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art ‘established a polemical relationship of reduction, refusal, and aggression to culture, social norms, values, and aesthetic canons’.<sup>779</sup> It therefore amounts to (to use Noys’ term) a ‘counter-form of art’ which eschews ornament and mimesis to perform a ‘violent reduction of existence to its basics’.<sup>780</sup> As we have seen, Beckett’s work contains striking examples of this process of distorting, dismantling, and laying bare. We have also seen that ideas of degeneracy and deformity were central to Beckett’s exposure of denuded life. On the canvases and in the texts of ‘anti-Platonic’ modernism, the form of human body, which has fallen from the transcendent apex it occupied in classical aesthetics, immerses itself in the messy stuff of material being. The body’s reduction to unformed flesh, and the loss of its idealised Platonic outline, shatters the normative aesthetics of human form. This is in part what Foucault finds so powerful about the stripped-bare flesh of European modernism, since it consists in nothing less than a violent refusal of the terms of beauty, respectability, decorum, and cultural value.

But it is also possible to take Foucault’s remarks about Beckett’s ‘anti-Platonism’ in a biopolitical direction. I have argued that Beckett’s deformed modernism exemplifies what Noys calls ‘a counter-form of art developed around the exposure of life’.<sup>781</sup> The de-creation of aesthetic and bodily form in *The Unnamable* offers an example of an art of resistance that emerged in opposition to the normalisation of life. But I have also suggested that Beckett was engaged in presenting the body as fleshy material stripped of value. This linking of the devaluation of life to the degeneration of bodily form problematizes the notion that Beckett’s writing offers an affirmation of life, even life which is outside the norm. Yet what would happen if, in conclusion, we were to read the ‘exposure of life’ in Beckett’s fiction alongside another one of Foucault’s modernist ‘anti-Platonists’ — Francis Bacon? The striking points of resemblance between Beckett’s and Bacon’s work when it comes to their disfiguring of the flesh have not gone unnoticed. According to Peter Fifield, in both Bacon and Beckett’s work ‘there is an emphasis not on the fixed form of the whole as constituted by its individual parts

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<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> Quoted in Michaud, p. 76.

<sup>778</sup> Deidre Blair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 314.

<sup>779</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 188.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid.

<sup>781</sup> Noys, ‘Vital Texts’, p. 170.

— limbs, hands, feet, and so on — but on its underlying fleshiness; the essential meat of the matter'.<sup>782</sup> 'For both Bacon and Beckett', Fifield tells us, 'the medical exception often provides the physiological exemplar; the distortion stresses the everyday condition of being clothed in tissue'.<sup>783</sup> I would add that the deformed appearance of the flesh in their work emerged as an indirect (i.e. non-representational) response to the devaluation of life exposed to biopolitical violence. For one thing, Beckett's relentless dismantling of the organicist idea of the body in *The Unnamable* closely parallels Esposito's reading of the politics of flesh in Bacon's painting. From Esposito's standpoint, 'the flight of flesh from the body, both barely sustained and strained to the point of spasms by the structure of the bones, constitute the center itself of the paintings of Francis Bacon'.<sup>784</sup> Bacon's paintings of deformed flesh are, according to Esposito, the closest thing we possess to an accurate portrait of 'the biopolitical practice of the animalization of man carried out to its lethal conclusion'.<sup>785</sup> Yet Bacon's exposure of flesh stripped of value points towards another way of thinking life which would leave behind the idea of the self-enclosed body, whether individual or collective: 'Flesh is the body that doesn't coincide with itself (as Nazism wanted [...]), that isn't unified beforehand in an organic form, and that is not led by a head [...] No. Flesh is constitutively plural, multiple, and deformed. It is also from this point of view that one can begin to imagine an affirmative biopolitics'.<sup>786</sup> It may be that the exposure of deformed flesh in Beckett's fiction likewise points us beyond the organicist idea of the body towards a 'life in common'.<sup>787</sup>

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<sup>782</sup> Peter Fifield, 'Gaping Mouths and Bulging Bodies: Beckett and Francis Bacon,' *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 18.1-2 (2009), 57-71 (p.59).

<sup>783</sup> Ibid, pp.60-61.

<sup>784</sup> Esposito, *Bios*, p. 168.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Campbell and Esposito, *Interview*, p. 72.

<sup>787</sup> Samuel Beckett, *How It Is*, ed. by Édouard Magessa O'Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 2009) p. 47.

## EPILOGUE

This dissertation has proposed that the atavistic bodies that appear in texts by Lewis, Loy, and Beckett comprise an ambivalent strain of modernist posthumanism. To that end, I have enquired into forms of the monstrous or anti-normative body that are marked by an orientation towards the past. As I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, the atavistic bodies fashioned by Lewis, Loy and Beckett revert to a past whose reappearance deforms and reconfigures the human. This thesis has expanded the idea of atavism beyond its usual association with devolution and animality. My consideration of atavistic automata, for example, has enlarged the idea of regression to include technological bodies and the animation of inorganic things in early cinema and twentieth-century philosophies of immanence. By extending the idea of atavism beyond its usual scope, I have sketched out a mode of modernist posthumanism that is more oriented towards the past than the future. From germinal life and elemental forces to insects and worms, the atavistic forms we encounter in the works of Lewis, Loy, and Beckett chart out an unmaking of species identities that far exceeds the bestial humans of the fin-de-siècle imagination. The idea that what comes after the human will involve a return of savage ancestral forces is a thread that runs through many of the texts I have considered. However, the backward-facing version of posthumanism I have sketched out is not expressive of a unified political attitude or aesthetic mode. In Lewis's satire, the reappearance of the archaic is symptomatic of the erosion of the privileged masculine subject in technological modernity; in Loy's poetry and prose, the atavistic body melds with the protoplasmic body, unmaking the distinction between finished and unfinished form; and in Beckett's fiction, bodies declining towards monstrous animality become nonproductive larval forms which fail to generate a liveable future. While the expanded conception of atavism I have traced in Lewis, Loy, and Beckett differs from the fin-de-siècle theories of Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, I have argued that the biopolitical discourses of degeneration and eugenics intersect with the modernist fascination with regressive monstrosity. Populations deemed 'backward' in the normative culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century became the subject of biopolitical management.<sup>788</sup> It should not be a surprise, then, that nonprogressive, anti-normative bodies yield a modernist posthumanism that turns away from the future. Reading the atavistic body as a palimpsest of the inhuman has enabled me to trace the divergent, distant, and often 'barbarous' ancestries of modernist monstrosity.

Is the future the definitive tense of posthumanism? Donna Haraway's announcement of the posthuman birth of the cyborg captures her feminist investment in future-oriented monstrosity. In 'The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others',

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<sup>788</sup> Love, p. 6.

she situates '[herself] and [her] readers' [...] within the womb of a pregnant monster',<sup>789</sup> and calls for 'a reproductive technology that might issue in something other than the sacred image of the same, something inappropriate, unfitting, and so, maybe, inappropriated'.<sup>790</sup> It thus seems, then, that monstrosity's promise inheres in its gestation of an alternative future that would deviate from the repetition compulsion enforcing the norms of 'Man'. More recently, Karen Barad has argued that '[m]onstrosity [...] cuts both ways. It can serve to demonize, dehumanize, and demoralize. It can also be a source of political agency. It can empower and radicalize'.<sup>791</sup> These affirmations of the monstrous exemplify how monstrosity, agency, and futurity have become bedfellows in posthumanist thought. By contrast, the retrogressive posthumanism I have studied in texts by Lewis, Loy, and Beckett is oriented towards a past that has not passed away because it continues to determine the shape of life in the present. This enquiry into atavism is a timely intervention to posthumanist studies because atavism resists the idea of superseding the human (and the animal) or founding a clear-cut break with anthropocentrism. Taking issue with the "strong" versions of posthumanism that impatiently declare the human's decentring in the present' (including object-oriented ontology and speculative realism), Christopher Peterson argues that 'even among more mainstream posthumanist theories, those that acknowledge the difficulties of moving "beyond" the human, the decentring of the human is understood as an achievable end'.<sup>792</sup> As a result, linearity has become a feature of posthumanist theorizations that construe the overcoming of ontological hierarchies as an attainable political objective. The anti-progressive posthumanism I have traced in Lewis, Loy, and Beckett does not yield a redemptive vision of life 'beyond' the human. Returning to ancestral forms of life following the erasure of ontological distinctions entails nonlinear exchanges between the afterlife of the human and the distant pasts before human knowledge and perception. Indeed, for these modernists, there is an insistent, anti-futural momentum that attends the waning dominance of the liberal subject.

Stefan Herbrechter has argued that '[t]echnology and future [...] could be named as the key words, and arguably even the transcendental signifieds of most posthumanisms'.<sup>793</sup> But techno-futurist visions of leaving the human behind often seem to rehearse theological structures of thought. Indeed, in posthumanisms which combine a zealous faith in technology with fantasies of escaping the embodied constraints of animal being, the connection in the

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<sup>789</sup> Donna Haraway, 'The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295-337 (p. 295).

<sup>790</sup> Ibid, p. 298.

<sup>791</sup> Karen Barad, 'Transmaterialities: Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings' in *GLQ*, 21.2-3 (2015), 387-422 (p. 392).

<sup>792</sup> Peterson, p. 13.

<sup>793</sup> Stefan Herbrechter, 'Posthumanism Without Technology, or How the Media Made Us Post/Human', in *Oh-Man, Oh-Machine — the Politics and Aesthetics of Posthumanism* (Tel Aviv, Israel, unpublished keynote address, May 2014), 1-19 (p. 3) <[https://www.academia.edu/13201635/Posthumanism\\_Without\\_Technology\\_or\\_How\\_the\\_Media\\_Made\\_Us\\_Post\\_Human](https://www.academia.edu/13201635/Posthumanism_Without_Technology_or_How_the_Media_Made_Us_Post_Human)> [November 2018]



modern imaginary between machines and futurity rekindles the ancient yearning to transcend the flesh. Transhumanists, for example, imagine that sovereign humanity occupies a present that is currently tainted by the animal past, but which gestures towards a postbiological future enhanced by technics. I have argued that Lewis inverts the normative temporal framing of an animal past, a human present, and a technological future. While Lewis remains invested in a masculinist conception of transcendent human subject, his sense of the atavistic logic behind the assault on 'Western Man' finds expression in his anxieties about technological regression and the reappearance of 'superseded' categories of thought like animism. In Lewis, animalization becomes a side-effect of the revolutionary upheavals of industrialized modernity, whilst technology connotes backwardness and the primordial. What I have argued is that Lewis's animus against the demise of the transcendent subject is grounded in his sense that modernity involves regress rather than progress. Indeed, Lewis's rhetoric of technological regression in antithetical not only the modern link between machines and futurity but also the teleological posthumanist vision of achieving 'human enhancement and progressive evolution' via technological advance.<sup>794</sup> This uncoupling of progress and technology speaks to a quintessentially modernist take on the erosion of historical improvement. Moreover, Lewis's assertions about the coalescence of machines and animality prefigure one of the fundamental paradoxes in posthumanist accounts of technology. As Paul Sheehan has pointed out, recent theorizations of technological posthumanism never wholly efface the atavistic remnants of animal embodiment. He explains that:

[E]ven the lures of technology cannot escape the shadow of atavistic posthumanism. Katherine Hayles, for example, acknowledges the pre-eminence of neural plasticity, or the human brain's adaptability to changing environments that are not of its making. However, she also regards a human being as primarily a form of embodied being'.<sup>795</sup>

Sheehan cites Hayles's claim that [t]he body is the net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history, and it is naïve to think that this history does not affect human behaviours at every level of thought and action'.<sup>796</sup> For Hayles, the persistence of these 'thousands of years of evolutionary history' within all possible technological futures confounds the fantasy of a streamlined posthuman subject liberated from animal finitude. Because the tissue of human embodiment remains entangled with evolutionary history, '[t]he posthuman body's atavistic reflexes thus constitute a boundary of sorts for human cybernetic integration'.<sup>797</sup> The stronger claim of Lewis's work is that human retrogression receives its impetus from the mechanization of life.

Similarly, Loy's treatment of the technological body as a figure of regression in 'Human Cylinders' goes against the grain of Futurism and technological posthumanism. But

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<sup>794</sup> Sheehan, *Posthuman Bodies*, p. 251.

<sup>795</sup> Ibid.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid.

<sup>797</sup> Ibid.

this antipathy to mechanical regression does not exhaust Loy's engagement with the connections between atavism and modern technology. Unlike the regressive automaton, the body-as-medium we encounter in *Insel* projects images of germinal life forms that antedate human and animal organisms. In making pre-human life reappear, the body-as-medium yields an atavistic unmaking of the forms that determine the present. However, the direction of the regressive posthumanism that Loy imagines in *Insel* implies a rejection of redemptive narratives that chart a progressive movement beyond the human. While Loy's vitalist manifestoes of the 1910s promote progressive projects of human improvement, her novel *Insel* dramatizes a narrative logic of retrogression and postponed futurity. But Loy's most remarkable contribution to the regressive posthumanism studied here is her reimagining of atavism as a mode of forgetting: while Seitler suggests that 'atavism can be said to open up liberal notions of the subject to the genealogical record', Loy imagines regression as an insistent return to unfinished forms that are too incomplete to leave a definitive archival trace.<sup>798</sup> Loy's modernism helps us to imagine an atavistic creativity based on forgetting the finished, ossified forms of the human present. Eschewing Loy's Bergsonian investment in germinal life, Lewis's and Beckett's animus against vitalism offers a striking counterpoint to the various affirmations of life currently animating posthumanist thought. As Benjamin Noys has recently suggested: 'Not since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century pairing of Nietzsche-Bergson, triangulated in the political by Sorel, have we seen such a theoretical dominance of vitalism'.<sup>799</sup> Vitalist attachments in recent posthumanist enquiries into literary modernism have mimicked the modernist tendency to treat 'life' as a redemptive political category. Erin Edwards's Deleuzian reflections on the 'modernist corpse' affirm 'a vitalist approach to the corpse in order to challenge the liberal humanist subject who has traditionally defined itself against a world of inertly reified matter but who, in doing so, risks being conceptualized as "bare life" itself'.<sup>800</sup> By contrast, Lewis, Loy, and Beckett's depictions of anti-vital bodies do not accord with the current political investment in the creativity and agency of life itself.

My intervention in these debates has been to demonstrate that any affirmative reading of modernist posthumanism will necessarily be incomplete, since the critics who read modernism's negation of the human as politically enabling do not account for the anti-redemptive nature of many of the modernist texts examined in this dissertation. That said, I do not intend my contribution to be any kind of challenge to the posthumanist critique of the autonomous human subject. Readings of modernist texts informed by posthumanist thought have produced stunning insights into literary works that contest human sovereignty and affirm the decentralized agencies of the nonhuman. Here one could point to Derek Ryan's musings on

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<sup>798</sup> Seitler, p. 2.

<sup>799</sup> Benjamin Noys, 'The Poverty of Vitalism (and the Vitalism of Poverty)' in *To Have Done With Life: Vitalism and Anti-Vitalism in Contemporary Philosophy* (Ma Ma Zagreb, unpublished conference paper, June 2011), 1-16 (p. 3).

<sup>800</sup> Erin E. Edwards, p. 5.

Woolf's engagement with the nonhuman in *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory* (2013), or Jeff Wallace's posthumanist reappraisal of Lawrence in *D.H. Lawrence, Science, and the Posthuman* (2005). 'The danger', however, 'is in the neatness of identifications'.<sup>801</sup> Beckett's aphorism could stand as a warning to critics who read modernist texts as illustrating the propositions of contemporary posthumanist thought. In bringing to light a panorama of atavistic bodies from modernist texts, this study has offered a revised account of the relationship between modernism and posthumanism. The majority of contemporary posthumanisms have valued movement, agency, life, becoming, and the creation of new forms.<sup>802</sup> In marked contrast, the strain of modernist posthumanism I have examined engages with inertia, impotence, death, immobility, and the loss of form. Modernism's atavistic bodies, as they appear in the work of Lewis, Loy and Beckett, lack the animating force of agency (political or otherwise), and the creative potential of posthumanism's future-oriented figures. While this de-emphasising of the future does not provide a blueprint for political action, the negativity of this formulation has the merit of critically alerting us to the persistence of progressive models of history in many contemporary posthumanisms. The idea that 'posthumanity is a desirable thing that has the power to liberate us from the chains of the Enlightenment' inadvertently reintroduces the conception of a linear march of progress from humanist barbarism to posthumanist civilisation.<sup>803</sup> To reiterate: the singularity of the regressive posthumanism studied in this dissertation arises from its refusal to participate in the future-directed orientation of progressive posthumanisms. I have argued that the specific tone of this refusal is quintessentially modernist, since, as Vincent Sherry has shown, one of the defining temporal dispositions of literary modernism is 'an expressive disenchantment with the cultural construction of forwardness'.<sup>804</sup> In other words, for literary modernists, innovation in the realm of aesthetics was a backward-facing proposition. As Heather Love has expressed it: 'Even when the modernists are making it new, they are inevitably grappling with the old: backwardness is a feature of even the most forward-looking modernist literature'.<sup>805</sup> The 'regressive' posthumanism I have been considering has reciprocal relations with the 'temporal splitting' Love identifies as the formative paradox of aesthetic modernism.<sup>806</sup> The association in literary modernism between what came before and what is in the process of emerging contributed to a sense that challenging prevailing social, political, and aesthetic norms required intellectual commerce with the past. By the same token, the modernists I have reflected on register the breakdown of humanist orthodoxies and norms of life by acknowledging the persistence of the past *before* the ascendancy of the humanist subject. Modernist posthumanism is a pre-humanism.

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<sup>801</sup> Beckett, 'Dante...Bruno.Vico', p. 19.

<sup>802</sup> Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction Vol. 2* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 75.

<sup>803</sup> Seitler, p. 18.

<sup>804</sup> Sherry, p. 15.

<sup>805</sup> Love, p. 6.

<sup>806</sup> Ibid.

My central claim has been that regression was the formative temporal signature of the strain of modernist posthumanism studied in this dissertation. As the recent focus on backwardness in modernist studies has emerged most forcefully from the work of queer theorists, more work needs to be done on the significance of queerness for the regressive posthumanism that has been the focus of this study. On one level, queering the monstrous bodies of modernism would enrich my reflections on the links between, in Lee Edelman's terms, 'anti-futurity' and the inhuman. On another level, the negative disposition of the modernist posthumanism I have discussed would be a fruitful resource for queer theorists who want to challenge the association between affirmation and monstrosity in recent work on 'queer inhumanism'. In 'Acts Against Nature' (2018), Elizabeth Wilson argues that 'the toxicity of the term [inhuman] has been more or less neutralized' in recent conversations about 'queer inhumanism'. For Wilson, 'too often, it seems, the politics of the queer inhuman are oriented towards affectively defanged, anti-sodomitical ends — clarity, identity, and the transformation-affirmation of the world, law and nature'.<sup>807</sup> This is most apparent in the affirmative readings of queer inhumanism that eschew the negative, so that the monstrous undoing of the human 'seems to cut only one way'.<sup>808</sup> To think about the queerness of the inhuman in modernism is to encounter the disruptive negative force of the monstrous. The connection between the queer and the inhuman in Beckett's fiction, for example, is neither 'affectively defanged' nor oriented towards clarity and political affirmation. In addition to the panoply of queer sex in Beckett's *Trilogy* and *How It Is*, his allusion to the 'eternally larval'<sup>809</sup> condition of his characters could be read as an inhumanist rewriting of the homophobic charge that to be queer is to be immature, undeveloped, not-yet-formed.<sup>810</sup>

My focus on the importance of the past in modernist posthumanism is indebted to Elizabeth Grosz's pioneering studies of time in Darwin, Bergson, and Nietzsche. Grosz interprets these thinkers as capturing the 'untimely' negotiation between past and present, 'becoming' and 'unbecoming', animating the emergence of new modes of life.<sup>811</sup> Unlike the modernists studied in this dissertation, however, Grosz affirms the potential for 'the inexhaustible resources of the past, of that realm of the past still untouched by the present, to bring about a critical response to the present and ideally to replace it with what is better in the future'.<sup>812</sup> The deep past that persists in the work of Lewis, Loy, and Beckett is less a generative site of creative potential than the location of *suspended* futurity: in Lewis's *Childermass*, the posthumous Satters is a figure of failed development who experiences returns to infancy and 'pre-historic' animality; in Loy's *Insel*, the degenerate artist is a figure of 'germinal life' and

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<sup>807</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, 'Acts Against Nature', *Angelaki*, 23.1 (2018), 19-31 (p. 27).

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.

<sup>809</sup> *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, p. 102.

<sup>810</sup> Love, p. 6.

<sup>811</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>812</sup> Grosz, *The Nick of Time*, p. 253.

decadent exhaustion; and in Beckett's *Trilogy*, the connection between degeneration and larval forms reiterates this dynamic of suspended becoming and dissolution. I have characterised these bodies not in terms of a posthumanist 'overcoming' of the humanist subject but as opening a space of uncertainty where becoming and inertia, metamorphosis and stasis, generation and degeneration, have become indistinct. My analysis of the work of Lewis, Loy, and Beckett suggests that, for these modernists, what follows in the wake of humanism is not a surpassing of the Enlightenment subject but a return of vestigial or primordial forces. The atavistic bodies fashioned by these modernists, bodies that have been divested of their human qualities, that are suspended between the negation of the human and an arrested becoming, do not yield a modernist posthumanism amenable to what Claire Colebrook has called 'the contemporary valorization of becoming over being'.<sup>813</sup> Many of the bodies I have studied are figures of incompleteness suspended between becoming and dissolution. Incompletion slides into depletion; becoming turns into arrested development. The atavistic forms of modernism are attempts to fashion a body in the wake of the collapse of the normative image of 'Man'. Lewis, Loy, and Beckett grasp for a new way of articulating the body after humanism, and find the remains of archaic, fossilised life preserved in the monstrous body of a species that can no longer guarantee its future nor deny its past.

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<sup>813</sup> Colebrook, *Sex After Life*, p. 75.

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